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"ADA WAS SAVED."

THE BARONET'S SECRET; Or, THE RIVAL HALF-SISTERS.

BY SARA CLAXTON.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAIL COACH.

GLIMMERMERE is a charming little village in

the east of England, situated about a quarter of a mile from the sea, in a well-wooded valley, through which the merriest of streams wends its way—a valley lovely enough to have been transported from Fairy-land.

The mail coach that ran between Glimmermere and the neighboring town was lazily proceeding toward the former place. There were but two passengers, and these, seemingly, uncongenial spirits, for one of them had the inside

of the coach all to himself; while the other sat, silent and gloomy, amid the luggage on the roof.

They were both members of the sterner sex; gentlemen, to all appearance.

He who had voluntarily constituted himself the outside passenger, was remarkably handsome. His large, dark eyes, now that their owner was in repose, were soft and melting as a woman's; but, for all that, somewhere in their placid depths lurked a tiny spark like unto the flickering embers of an all but extinguished fire—a spark that wanted but a breath to fan it into flame.

A rich mass of curly dark hair surmounted his broad white forehead; while the lower parts of his face were concealed by heavy mustaches, and a full black beard.

But when the coach drew up at the village inn, the outside passenger's broad-brimmed hat was pressed low down upon his brow, and a thick scarf so effectually concealed his face, that his best friend might not have recognized him.

The other traveler, a pleasant-looking young fellow, sprung lightly from the coach, nearly upsetting "mine host."

"Beg pardon, Andy!" he said, carelessly. "I am very awkward. How are you, old fellow?"

"Good gracious!" ejaculated the innkeeper. "Surely my eyes deceive me? It cannot—no, it cannot be Sir Guy Vurnal!"

The gentleman laughed good-naturedly. "Yes, Andy, it is I, my very self."

"I am overjoyed to see you, sir."

"And how are you all getting on at Glimmermere? Your wife and family are well, I hope?"

"Everything and everybody is well and flourishing, Sir Guy."

"I am glad to hear it. I suppose they have sent no carriage for me from the Crag?"

The innkeeper shook his head.

"Do they expect you at home, Sir Guy?"

"Well, not exactly. I came down earlier than I had intended."

"Will you ride or drive to the Crag, sir?"

"Neither, thank you; I shall walk. You may send on my luggage after me."

The gentleman started on his solitary walk, stopping now and then as he passed through the village to exchange a friendly word with the simple folk who had known and loved him since his very birth.

Glimmermere consists of some three or four dozen neat cottages, forming a complete square, in the center of which stands a monument—a marble column, supporting a clock with four dials; while at the base of the pillar, four giant mouths emit as many crystal jets of water.

Upon the front of the monument you might read the following simple inscription:

"Erected by his Tenantry,
To the Memory of
SIR WILLOUGHBY GROVE VURNAL, Bart.,
of Crag-Vurnal.
Died May 2d, 18—."

The outside passenger strolled across the road, inspected, and read the inscription on the monument.

"Curse him, and all of them!" he muttered. "Ah, Sir Willoughby! you have had your day; mine is at hand. You are in your grave; but your son lives, and on him shall my vengeance fall!"

Midway between the village and the coast, a fine old mansion, standing on a considerable eminence, rears its time-stained walls higher than the tallest trees.

Built of a dull gray stone, with innumerable turrets, quaintly constructed gables, terraces and balconies resting upon massive buttresses, together with chimneys the most fantastic-looking, Crag Vurnal is, indeed, a picturesque, if not a beautiful, dwelling.

Upon a rustic seat on the lawn, that gently sloped from the walls of Crag-Vurnal almost to the water's edge, sat two ladies, both young, both exquisitely fair.

Isabel Garnett and Ada May were half-sisters. Ada was the youngest of the two by eighteen months; and the one was a striking likeness of the other.

There was, however, a distinguishing mark, but for which their wonderful resemblance to each other might have been confusing.

Of the average height, there was not an inch difference in their stature, while the figure of each was slender and graceful. Rich wavy hair of the purest golden hue framed their oval faces, which were perfect in feature and clear and delicate in complexion.

Sitting there in the moonlight, and gazing listlessly out upon the ocean, little dreamt these fair girls that one who was destined to change the whole course of their hitherto simple and uneventful lives was attentively regarding them from the shade of a neighboring tree.

The unseen observer was a gentleman.

As the minutes wore on, the scene upon which he was so fixedly gazing began to assume an air of unreality, as though it were a vision; while it preserved, at the same time, all the distinctness of a picture.

The slumbering ocean in the foreground; the quaint old mansion to the rear; the richly-tinted trees, with their fantastic shadows; the almost unnatural stillness of the air; and, lastly, the two graceful forms, draped in snowy-white muslin, the soft moonlight falling over them like a pure transparent veil—each of these lent its own peculiar charm to the scene.

The two ladies, whom we have introduced

as Isabel Garnett and Ada May, had been silent for some minutes, when the latter said: "Isabel, I should like to be supernatural. Just think how delightful it would be to skip at will over the waves, or soar aloft on the moon-beams!"

Ada uttered this somewhat startling desire in a more serious tone than her words seemed to warrant; and a little sigh of regret stole from her lips as her sister's substantial laughter recalled her to the reality of her mortal condition.

Isabel was a merry, light-hearted girl, who found it difficult to be serious for many minutes consecutively.

"Invest in a broomstick, my dear!" she cried, lightly; "and then advertise for an apprenticeship to the old woman who sweeps the cobwebs from the sky. The rest will be easy of accomplishment. Do you remember, Ada, we used to say, long ago, that you would make a charming little witch, with those great brown eyes of yours, that must have been bestowed upon you by the grossest mistake Nature ever perpetrated?"

"Nature never errs," said the other girl, somewhat sharply.

"I'm not so sure of that," declared Isabel, with mock gravity. "For instance, I think she erred in not making me a grasshopper, or a cricket, or even a butterfly. But, rather than any of these, I should prefer to become Lady Vurnal."

"I suppose you mean," Ada said, "that you would have no objection to Sir Guy as a husband?"

"How else should I become Lady Vurnal?" was the reply, uttered in the most careless manner possible.

Ada turned aside, and her fingers closed tightly upon the soft muslin of her dress.

"Why, Ada," said Isabel, in some surprise, "you surely are not cold?"

"Cold! no. Why do you think so?"

"I thought I felt you shiver."

"Shiver! Did I? Oh, then, I suppose some one was walking over my destined grave. But, Isabel, would you like cousin Guy to hear you talk as you have just been talking?"

Just then the gentleman came from under the tree, and advanced toward the ladies.

With a little scream of surprise, not unmingled with pleasure, Isabel ran to meet him, both hands extended. Ada retained her seat.

"Oh, Guy!" cried the former, impulsively; "you are so much earlier than we had expected. Welcome, welcome home!"

"A thousand thanks, my dear little cousin!" was the response, as the tall new-comer bent his head to kiss the pouting lips so innocently proffered for the caress. "Dear me!" he added; "how you have grown—and how beauti-

ful! Let me see—are you Isabel? Yes, of course you are; there is no mistaking the eyes."

Ada did not rise, but, quietly extending her hand, said, in a rather cold tone, "Welcome home, cousin Guy. Aunt will be so glad to see you!"

"What!" cried the gentleman, "is this Ada, my little brown-eyed witch, grown so formal and reserved? Where is my kiss, Miss Icicle?"

"Nonsense, Guy! You seem to forget that we are no longer children."

"Then Isabel shall pay for you!"

"No, indeed!" retorted Isabel. "Ada must discharge her own debts, or let them stand over." And she darted away; turning her head to add, "It is time to go indoors: the dew is falling. I shall run on first and tell aunt of your arrival, Guy."

"No. Isabel, please do not!" he urged, quickly. "I want to give my mother a little surprise. Come along, Ada; we shall be better friends by-and-by." And away he ran after Isabel, beckoning Ada to follow.

But the latter did not stir.

"Yes, Isabel Garnett," she muttered, passionately, "you would like to be lady Vurnal! But you never shall while the little brown-eyed witch lives! I, and I alone, shall be mistress of Crag-Vurnal!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed a hoarse voice almost at her very elbow; and, with a stifled scream of alarm, she looked round to behold the bearded face of a man peering at her from behind a shrub.

She waited to see and hear no more, but, with the speed of a young fawn, darted away toward the house.

CHAPTER II.

A THIEF IN THE NIGHT.

ON the threshold of his ancestral home Sir Guy Vurnal found himself unexpectedly in his mother's embrace, a mother's loving words of welcome sounding in his ears.

She kissed him over and over again, and, holding him at arm's length, called him her "handsome, noble boy!"

But he was *not* handsome, nor was he ugly. Youth, health, and wealth had Sir Guy; but Fortune had denied him beauty. He was simply what people term "passable-looking." We shall only add that he was of the average height, with "sandy" hair and mustache, and frank, gray eyes.

"Oh, Guy!" murmured Lady Vurnal, tearfully, "how I have longed for this hour! The two years of our separation have seemed so long, so very long! Thank Heaven, they are over at last!"

Lady Vurnal had now been a widow about five years.

The late Sir Willoughby Vurnal was said to have been somewhat eccentric in disposition; indeed, it was whispered that he had not been right in his mind.

Sir Willoughby had inserted a clause in his will to the effect that his son was to banish himself from his home for two years after he had become of age.

Lady Vurnal and Isabel were divesting the traveler of his wrappers and great-coat, when Ada rushed in upon them, white and panting.

She sunk, all but fainting, into one of the hall chairs.

"What has happened?" inquired Lady Vurnal, tenderly, as she wound her arms around the terrified girl.

Now that she was safe in the spacious and well-lighted hall, her friends around her, Ada began to think that she had allowed herself to be unnecessarily alarmed.

After all, what had she seen?—only the face of a man. How had she acted?—like a silly school-girl, she told herself, with a feeling of disgust. What would Sir Guy think of her?

And suppose Sir Guy should come in contact with that strange man out on the lawn, was it not just possible that the latter might betray her—might reveal to the Baronet the words he *must* have overheard her utter?

The thought was torture to her. At any price she would prevent such a calamity.

While these thoughts were rapidly coursing through her brain, her anxious relatives were waiting for her explanation.

It came at last, in the unlooked-for form of a loud and prolonged peal of laughter.

"My dear Ada!" observed Lady Vurnal, rather reproachfully, and wholly taken aback by the girl's strange behavior.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" sighed Isabel, in a disappointed tone, her fears for Ada having been dispersed by the latter's apparent merriment. "I was certain that she had seen a ghost, or at *least* a highway robber!"

"Oh, you dear, foolish people!" put in Ada, now quite herself again. "Surely *I* am not responsible for the ludicrously grave faces I see around me? It is true I made a somewhat precipitate entrance among you, and that I was panting and breathless; but there is nothing to be alarmed at in *that*. The fact is, I had become so chilled from sitting so long in our favorite spot, that I thought a good run up the lawn would benefit me. Oh, dear me! it is really so absurd! Had I been a bombshell, dropped into your midst, I could not have caused greater consternation!"

And the fair girl went off into another apparently uncontrollable fit of laughter.

Lady Vurnal was considerably relieved, yet not quite convinced that all was right.

"I have often warned you, Ada, that it is

most unwise to sit out of doors so late in the evening; besides, I do not approve of the practice, and hope you will not do so again."

With this mild reproof, her ladyship allowed the affair to pass over, and in a few minutes more the returned traveler was again the chief center of interest, which he very naturally continued to be for the remainder of the evening. He entertained the little party with a somewhat curtailed account of his travels, which narrative we do not reproduce, as it was neither brilliant in coloring nor startling in detail.

That night, when about to retire to rest, Lady Vurnal placed a sealed letter in her son's hand, with the words, "Guy, the day before he died, your father intrusted me with this letter. He bade me deliver it to you on your return after your two years' tour; for he never entertained the slightest doubt but that you would scrupulously carry out his wishes as expressed in his will. This little packet has lain in my desk for five long years; but the hour has now come when it must leave my custody. I know not its contents."

Left to himself, the young man gazed with no little surprise upon the letter. He had never heard of the existence of such a missive. Tenderly, almost reverently, he handled it; while the sight of his own name, written in his father's well-known handwriting, all but unmanned him. But what was there in the very *feel* of that ordinary-looking envelope that sent a strange chill to his heart? By some mysterious process, for which he was wholly unable to account, he seemed to *know* that its contents would be far from agreeable.

Sir Guy stood up and paced the room for some seconds. Then he opened a glass door, and strode out upon the lawn into the moonlit night. All was silent; the very trees seemed to slumber.

The young Baronet sat down upon the seat that a few hours previously had been graced by the lovely forms of Isabel and Ada. With tender, half-reluctant fingers he at length summoned courage to break the seal of the letter.

His face was pale and sorrowful, and a mist of tears gathered in his eyes. But stay!—a change comes over that sorrow-stricken countenance. Intense surprise is depicted in every feature. Again he reads the fatal letter, and then it flutters from his nerveless grasp to the ground.

"I *must* be dreaming; it is impossible! Oh, father, father! is *this* my inheritance?"

Then the excited young man starts to his feet, and paces to and fro, his whole demeanor indicative of the keenest emotion.

There is a slight rustle among the shrubs, which are numerous and bushy in this part of the lawn. Sir Guy hears it not.

A tall figure—that of a man, with hand-

some, bearded face—cautiously glides from shrub to shrub, until within a few feet of the rustic seat. Seizing his opportunity when the Baronet's back is turned, the wily intruder darts from his ambush, snatches the letter from the ground, and is gone as silently as he came.

A few minutes more, and Sir Guy is gazing fixedly upon the spot where he last saw his father's letter.

There is not enough wind to disturb a feather. Not a living creature has approached the spot—the Baronet is certain of *that*; yet, good heavens! the letter—that fatal letter!—has vanished!

CHAPTER III.

ADA VERSUS ISABEL.

SIR GUY was the last to enter the breakfast-room the next morning. He looked pale, and the unmistakable traces of having passed a sleepless night were visible in his countenance. But when questioned on the subject he declared himself quite well—only a little tired after his journey.

Lady Vurnal instantly thought of the letter that she had guarded so carefully for five long years. Could it be that it had contained some distressing intelligence? But she asked no questions; neither did her son then volunteer any information regarding the unlucky communication.

As breakfast proceeded Sir Guy's spirits rallied a little, and he began to look more like his former self. Isabel and Ada, in their pretty pink and white morning dresses, seemed to vie with each other which should appear the more charming. Ada was not gifted with the cheerful disposition and artless, winning ways of her elder sister; but her calm, self-possessed manner and ready wit, together with a sort of listless languor that stole over her at times, were not without their own peculiar charm.

These two girls had been brought up at Crag-Vurnal. They were the daughters of the late Sir Willoughby's only sister, who had been twice married; first to an excellent man—her father's choice—who had left her nobly provided for. After his death, she espoused a worthless spendthrift—her heart's choice, her first and only love—who squandered her fortune, broke her heart, and then followed her to an early grave.

Isabel Garnett was six years and a half, Ada May but five years of age, when their uncle took them to live at the Crag.

"A penny for your thoughts, Guy!" said Lady Vurnal, as she looked across the breakfast table at her son, who for the last few seconds had been gazing alternately from Isabel to Ada, in a puzzled sort of manner. "I think I could guess," added his mother.

He returned her glance almost defiantly.

"You were wondering which of your cousins is the prettiest."

The old lady's words seemed to startle him; he flushed hotly, and looked confused. Nevertheless, he admitted the charge.

Ada's brown eyes sparkled.

"And pray, sir critic," she cried, with the slightest possible tinge of scorn in her soft, languid voice, "which of us has gained the palm? Weigh your words well, sir," she added, loftily, and with a disdainful glance at her rival, "ere you consign *me* a victim at the shrine of my own presumption!"

"Oh, Guy!" cried Isabel, pleadingly, "please let *me* live, for I also have a shrine of presumption, and am pleased to pronounce myself 'The Belle of Glimmermere!' Sounds well, does it not? Ada's eyes are unnatural—unsuitable to her style. Don't *you* think so, Guy?"

There was nothing spiteful in this little speech, for Isabel delighted in her sister's beauty; but she also took a mischievous pleasure in teasing her about the color of her eyes, a point upon which Ada was ridiculously sensitive.

Sir Guy was somewhat taken aback by the manner in which each girl appeared to advocate the cause of her own beauty.

"We await your decision, sir," resumed Ada, carelessly; yet a keen observer might have noticed that she was anxious for the issue of the subject under consideration.

"'Pon my word, Ada," the young Baronet declared, "I am unable to decide this important question."

"In other words," retorted Ada, with a chagrin that was not wholly concealed even from Sir Guy, "you cannot find it in that great soft heart of yours to visit either of us with the withering blight of your disapprobation."

"And," struck in Isabel, "the consequences of your timidity, or soft-heartedness, be upon your own head; for, naturally, we both feel aggrieved at your indecision. You have made two enemies instead of one. Henceforth, sir, it is war to the knife!"

"War to the knife!" echoed Ada.

"Unhappy me!" sighed the victim. Alack for him! it was not a feigned sigh.

"What do *you* think, auntie dear?" queried Isabel, turning to Lady Vurnal.

"I think, my love," said the old lady, quietly, "that the conversation might be changed with very great advantage. It is too personal, to say the least of it. Besides, Guy, you must not lend a helping hand to spoil these incorrigible girls, by adding fuel to the already well-kindled flames of their vanity."

"That's right, auntie dear," cried Isabel, "Guy deserves a good scolding; spare him not, I beseech you."

"Cruel little monkey!" cried Sir Guy, with

a forced smile. "What shall I do to obtain your forgiveness?"

"Can we forgive him, Ada?"

"Subject to a condition, yes," replied the dignified lady addressed.

"And the condition?"

"That the culprit rides with us this morning," was the reply.

"Agreed!" he cried, with appropriate sprightliness. "By the by, mother," he added, this little affair being satisfactorily arranged, something quite mysterious occurred to me last night."

He had been turning things over in his mind, and had decided that it would be wise to make some allusion to his father's letter, fearing that were he to maintain a complete silence on the subject, his mother would conjecture that all was not right. Willingly, gladly would he have taken her into his confidence, but circumstances forbade that he should do so.

"Mysterious, Guy?" said Lady Vurnal, incredulously. "What do you mean?"

In spite of himself, the young man's voice fell, as he replied: "The letter you gave me last night, mother—which, by the way, was strictly of a business nature—left my possession in a most extraordinary manner."

His auditors looked surprised but said nothing.

Sir Guy continued: "After you had all retired last night, I strolled out upon the lawn to read my letter in the moonlight, and when I had done so, the paper slipped from my fingers to the ground, where I left it, while I took a few turns up and down. It seems utterly impossible that any one could have approached the spot without my knowledge, as I did not stir twenty yards from the letter; nevertheless, when I looked for it, it was nowhere to be seen."

Ada looked up sharply, as if about to make a remark, but as suddenly checked the impulse, and fell to studying the pattern upon her plate.

"The letter must have been blown away, Guy," was Lady Vurnal's solution of the mystery.

"Impossible, my dear mother; there was not a breath of wind."

"It is very strange!"

"Most unaccountable!"

And then Sir Guy rose from the table, as if anxious to put an end to the discussion.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK.

It was a lovely morning about a week after Sir Guy's return. He and his fair cousin were enjoying their accustomed morning ride. To-day they had chosen a narrow road that skirted the rocky coast.

A cloudless blue sky overhead; to the right lay a panorama of green fields, diversified by

patches of golden stubble-land, and fringed with graceful trees, brilliant in their rich autumn covering; while to the left the ocean smiled deceitfully in its borrowed loveliness.

Sir Guy was feverishly gay. Cankering care might gnaw at his vitals during the long, sleepless hours of the night; *then* he was a resigned victim; but now, mounted on his spirited mare, with those lovely girls by his side, a smiling world around him—*now* he was determined to enjoy himself.

Ada was riding behind, the road being too narrow to admit of more than a pair of horses traveling abreast with safety.

"Oh, Guy," cried Isabel, turning a glowing face to her companion, "what a delightful ride! How I love these golden autumn days; every thing looks so bright and cheerful. Perhaps," she added, with an arch glance, "it is because *you* have returned. And yet, Guy, you are not happy yourself—at least, I have sometimes thought so."

"Then you have thought wrongly," he declared, smiling back at her. "I am happy—I *will* be happy in spite of all! Why should I suffer for the wrong-doing of others?" he continued, almost fiercely.

"Forgive me, Guy," murmured Isabel; "I fear my thoughtless words have awakened painful reflections."

Sir Guy was in a dilemma. He could hardly retract what, in an unguarded moment, had escaped his lips, and certainly did not wish to add to it by further admissions.

"Isabel," he said, after a momentary pause, "you must try and forget my foolish ravings; and please do not repeat this conversation to *any one*. And now let us talk of something else. So you are really glad that I have come back?"

"What a silly question! Are you not my cousin, whom I have known since childhood?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure," acquiesced Sir Guy, musingly; "and we have always been staunch friends."

Isabel was shocked at the glimpse she had accidentally obtained of her cousin's unhappiness, and it was some time ere she could regain her wonted cheerfulness of manner. She strove hard to appear unconcerned, but was no dissembler, and it required but little penetration on her companion's part to perceive that she was ill at ease. Nor was the knowledge altogether distasteful to the young Baronet; for, much as he regretted the unguarded words that had caused her uneasiness, it was pleasant to feel himself an object of interest to the fair girl by his side—pleasant to surprise those violet eyes fixed upon him with a sweet, sympathizing tenderness.

"We missed you so much, Guy, when you were abroad," resumed Isabel, after a few moments' silence. "To be sure," she added, with

affected gayety, "the Squire was most attentive and gallant, when his bodily ailments would admit of his venturing abroad. But, you know, Guy, Mr. Bevil is not just the most cheerful companion in the world, though I like him very much indeed."

Mr. Bevil, or "The Squire," as he was popularly called, was a bachelor of forty, possessing a snug little property adjoining the Craig-Vurnal estate.

"By the by," said Sir Guy, "I have not seen old Bevil since my return. I beg your pardon, Isabel; I must not speak of Mr. Frank Bevil in disrespectful terms, since he is a particular friend of yours," he continued, with rather a comical expression of countenance.

"I should not allow any one to speak disrespectfully of Mr. Bevil. I cannot tell you how much I esteem and respect our kind-hearted neighbor."

"Oh, indeed! Then, perhaps, he is an admirer of yours?"

"That," she retorted, with a blush, and a toss of her pretty head, "is a question which I shall not answer!"

A look of incredulous surprise passed over the Baronet's face.

"Am I to understand, Isabel—" he began; but she interrupted him with, "You are to understand nothing, Mr. Inquisitiveness!"

As she spoke, something must have tickled her fancy, for she burst out laughing—a genuine laugh of mirth, it was, this time.

Sir Guy did not pursue the subject.

And Ada! What was she doing all this time? Well, she was playing her game as she thought best. She could not hear what the others were talking about; but it struck her that they were a little too confidential, if she might judge from appearances.

"Little stupid!" she muttered, spitefully, in allusion to her half-sister, "she is playing a foolish and a dangerous game!"

Our little party suddenly came upon the figure of a woman clad in widow's weeds. She was standing, motionless, upon a narrow ledge of rock, her face turned toward the sea, her garments fluttering gracefully in the breeze.

This sable-robed, statue-like figure, outlined against the clear blue sky, had a strange and startling effect.

The horses shied. Ada, whose attention had been centered upon her companions, was taken utterly by surprise.

Her horse snorted, reared, then, seizing the bit between his teeth, bounded forward past the other horses.

Ada quickly regained her self-control, and kept her saddle.

"Oh, Heaven!" almost shrieked the woman in black, as she turned round and saw what

had occurred. "She will be killed! The chasm, the chasm!" And, evidently aware that she herself had been the cause of the disaster, sunk upon her knees in an agony of terror.

A feeling of faintness came over Isabel. She allowed herself to slip from her saddle; and there, upon the hard, dry road, she lay huddled up in a heap, her hands before her eyes, as if to shut out some horrible sight.

Meanwhile, Sir Guy had started in pursuit of the runaway horse.

He thought with terror of the gaping abyss ahead, through the dismal depths of which the eye of mortal had never yet penetrated.

But suddenly the Baronet reins in his horse, while an exclamation of astonishment bursts from his lips.

A stranger had appeared, and had flung himself between Ada and certain death.

Regardless of his imminent peril, he had stationed himself in the middle of the road, and when the foaming animal dashed blindly up, he seized the reins close to the bit, and was dragged clear off his feet. But he did not release his hold. The horse slackened speed, plunged and reared, then all three together rolled upon the ground.

Ada was flung nearly a yard from her horse, which lay at full length, panting violently.

The courageous stranger was the first to recover his feet; he was by the lady's side in a moment. She cast one searching glance up into his handsome, bearded face—a glance of recognition—then fell back in a faint.

Her deliverer was about to kneel by her side, when the sound of approaching horse's hoofs smote upon his ear. His dark eye rested for a few seconds upon the girl's lovely, pallid countenance; then he turned and fled.

When Ada opened her eyes Sir Guy was anxiously bending over her; but when she recognized his features, a shade of disappointment crossed her face, even as a sudden squall ruffles the smiling countenance of the deep.

She sat up and gazed around.

"Where is *he*—my preserver?" she inquired, in a low, hesitating tone.

"Gone!" said her cousin, in a half-vexed manner. "The noble fellow did not wait for our thanks."

"Gone!" repeated Ada, blankly. Then she burst into tears. "Cruel, cruel!" she sobbed. "He has saved my life at the risk of his own; and yet would deny me the pleasure of telling him how grateful I am."

"Nay, Ada! is it wise thus to distress yourself?" remonstrated her companion. "It is true, your hero has acted somewhat strangely; but you will probably soon see him again. Do you know him? Who is he?"

Almost despairingly came her reply.

"Alas! he is an utter stranger to me."

"Indeed! Why, it is quite romantic!"

"Where is Isabel?" pursued the other, in quite a dejected tone of voice.

"Oh, I must ride back to her; she will be in torture all this time. But, no; I cannot leave you alone, Ada," said Sir Guy, hesitatingly.

"I shall do very well, Guy. Indeed, I am perfectly recovered now. Yes, please go to Isabel."

Sir Guy went—reluctantly; for it did not occur to him that Ada was only too glad to get rid of him. She longed to be alone—to think.

"Guy is such a bore," she soliloquized, as he rode away. "Oh, if he were only like *him*!"

Sir Guy found Isabel still crouching in her lowly position, her face buried in her hands.

"Why, Isabel! mourning your sister's escape?" said Sir Guy.

With a glad cry, she sprung to her feet.

"Ada—our precious Ada?" was all she could say.

"Is safe, Isabel—safe and sound as you or I!"

"Thank Heaven! Oh, thank Heaven!" And grateful tears coursed each other down her cheeks.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!" ejaculated the gentleman, uneasily; "why will you women always cry when the danger is past?"

"You saved her!" rejoined Isabel, pursuing her own thoughts. "Oh, noble, noble Guy!"

"No, Isabel," he said, "I am not so fortunate a being as you imagine. Ada owes her life to a stranger."

"A stranger?"

"Yes, a stranger. But what became of the woman?"

"The woman?"

"Yes; the widow—she who frightened our horses."

"Oh," said Isabel, with a shudder. "I had quite forgotten her."

In vain they looked about for the sable-robed figure. It was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER V.

HOPES AND FEARS.

ON the following day, Sir Guy caused inquiries to be made, which resulted in his ascertaining that a gentleman of the name of Cox was staying at the "Vurnal Arms." Therefore, concluding that this person and the hero of yesterday's misadventure was one and the same, he strolled down to the village, with the intention of calling upon and thanking the stranger for his gallant services.

"I'm glad to see you, Sir Guy," was the innkeeper's cheery greeting. "Hope you and her ladyship is well, and the young ladies, too, sir?"

"We are all well, thank you, Andy," returned the gentleman, in his usual kindly tone of voice.

"No doubt, sir," went on the other, leading the way into his comfortable parlor, "you have come to honor me with your promised visit. It's very good of you, Sir Guy; very good, indeed."

"I certainly hoped to see you, Andy," rejoined the Baronet; "but independent of that, I came to call upon Mr. Cox, who, I understand, is at present staying here."

The innkeeper's face fell.

"So sorry, Sir Guy," he returned. "This very morning the gentlemen went up to London upon urgent business, and I don't expect him back for some days to come."

"That is unfortunate. You are sure, though, that he intends returning?"

"Oh, dear, yes, sir; his portmanteau is here! If you remember, Sir Guy, Mr. Cox came down the night you did, and he's been here ever since!"

"Indeed!" said the Baronet, in a slightly surprised tone. "I have not the least recollection of having noticed him."

"You see, sir, he's an invalid, suffering from—well, I don't exactly know what, now I come to think on it. He don't look very bad; howsoever, he must be the best judge of his own health."

"What part of the world does Mr. Cox hail from?" inquired the Baronet.

"Well, Sir Guy," returned the man, musingly, "I don't rightly know where he comes from; but I *do* know that he's a gentleman of property, and a great traveler—been all round the world, sir, and back again. He says this is the prettiest village he ever saw; but that it is spoilt by—guess what, Sir Guy!"

And as the innkeeper came to a full stop, he drew himself up quite indignantly.

The other answered, with a smile, "I give it up, Andy. I am a bad hand at guessing."

"Well, sir, Mr. Cox thinks our beautiful monument ruins the appearance of the village, and he says he'd like to see it razed to the ground?"

"Indeed!" cried Sir Guy, good-humoredly. "I'm afraid Mr. Cox has no eye for the artistic. At all events, the people of Glimmermere do not regard the monument in the same light that he does; so I suppose it is like to stand, in spite of him."

"Stand, Sir Guy!" echoed the other, almost wrathfully. "I should think so, indeed, as long as one of us remains to defend it!"

Very pleasantly passed the days at Crag-Vurnal. The three young people were the best of friends; and good Lady Vurnal had already begun to tell herself that the dearest wish of her life was in a fair way to be realized.

But the complacent smile would sometimes vanish from her face, giving place to an expression of mingled doubt and anxiety; and

she would ask herself, "Which is to be my daughter—Isabel or Ada?"

This important question, however, she could never satisfactorily determine, each of her nieces seeming to receive an equal share of her son's attentions.

Although Lady Vurnal was hardly conscious of entertaining a preference, Isabel was her favorite.

But even had the old lady set her heart upon having Isabel for her daughter-in-law, she would have had too much sense to interfere in so delicate a matter; moreover, she knew very well that no man ever fell in love with a girl because his mother had told him to do so.

Lady Vurnal did not attempt to disguise from herself the fact that her son was at times given to fits of melancholy. He would sit for hours silent and gloomy; and often in the midst of company, his brow would grow troubled, his manner become abstracted, plainly showing that he had some secret cause of disquiet.

Once, indeed, his mother had ventured to take him to task upon the subject; but he had systematically avoided her affectionate inquiries, returning but scant and curt replies. So, hurt more than she would like to have confessed, she desisted from her attempt to win his confidence; nor did she again renew it.

In the meantime, Ada was quietly laying siege to the Baronet's heart; nor had she, as yet, any serious misgivings as to the ultimate success of her schemes.

But had she really loved her cousin, her heart would have told her that the smiles he lavished upon Isabel were sweeter and more gentle than those that fell to her lot; for, though Love is blind in some respects, he is ever wide awake to his own individual interests.

Now, Isabel noticed not Sir Guy's somewhat unattractive appearance. In him she beheld her girlish ideal of all that was handsome, manly, and noble. From her very childhood she had thought of him thus.

Ada, on the contrary, cared nothing for the man, but a great deal for the position his wife would be entitled to.

CHAPTER VI.

JASPER COX.

ADA MAY was at length awakened to the knowledge that affairs were not progressing exactly as she could have wished. She had conducted her wooing on principles subtle as they were unobtrusive, no very cheering results accruing, it is true; but, then, as far as she knew, her rival step-sister had not been more successful. Indeed, Ada had been under the impression that Sir Guy was more demonstrative in his attentions to her than to Isabel. Such may have been the case; but it was more

likely that this was one of the pleasing delusions about to be dispelled.

The young Baronet had promised to accompany the ladies to a concert to be given at Halton, the neighboring town. The entertainment was to come off in the afternoon of the day at which our story has now arrived.

But Isabel did not grace the breakfast-table by her presence this morning, being confined to her room with a sick headache, attended by symptoms of fever.

There was nothing to fear, Lady Vurnal declared. Isabel was subject to these little attacks. She would be better in the course of the day.

Notwithstanding this reassuring assertion, Sir Guy's alarm was very evident; he even went so far as to say that the finest music in world would have no attraction for him if Isabel were not well enough to accompany them to the concert. The result was that the project was abandoned, and they all stayed at home.

We need scarcely say that the young man's openly expressed concern at his cousin's indisposition was as pleasing to his mother as it was distasteful to the now thoroughly aroused Ada.

After breakfast, the elder lady betook herself to the invalid's room. Sir Guy, in a fit of moody abstraction, sat at a window, an unopened book in his hand; while Ada donned her garden hat, and went for a walk. As she strolled leisurely along the path that led to the cliffs, her fair brow grew dark and troubled. She was putting two and two together, and the sum total of her calculation was anything but pleasing to her.

"Blind! blind!" she muttered to herself. "This cannot have been the growth of a day. How sly they have been! Well, well, this fair blossom shall be crushed ere it runs to seed!"

Ada found herself standing upon the cliffs. There was rather a stiff breeze, and the sea wore a sullen and troubled aspect, relieved by the snowy wavelets which we call "white horses."

Firm, hasty footsteps rung upon the rocks behind her, and Ada turned to confront the handsome stranger to whom she owed so much—her "hero" himself.

Haughty and self-possessed as was her usual demeanor, why did the rich crimson mount to the girl's cheeks?—what meant that tingling sensation that surged through her veins?—why throbbed her heart so wildly, so exultantly? Isabel and the baronet were as completely eradicated from her mind as though they had never occupied it.

The gentleman appeared perfectly cool and collected—a fact that irritated Ada, conscious, as she was, of her own unwonted confusion.

He was the first to speak. "May I venture

to hope that you sustained no injury from your recent accident?"

The words were accompanied by a look at once respectful, admiring, tender.

With an effort, Ada recovered her self-command, and, extending her hand, said: "I have so longed for an opportunity to thank you, sir, for the noble manner in which you risked your life for mine! Indeed, I am very, very grateful, though I cannot find words to express all I feel!"

"Pray, madam, do not say any more," rejoined the other, deprecatingly. "Believe me, your good will is more than I deserve for the poor service I was fortunate enough to render you, and the importance of which you so very much over-rate."

The lady smiled benignly, as she replied, "I fear, Mr. Cox— That I believe is your name?"

The gentleman bowed slightly.

"Mine is Ada May," she added, graciously. "But I was about to say that your generosity and disinterestedness would blind you to your justly merited deserts. But, now that I think of it, might I ask why you left me so abruptly on that day the memory of which I almost shudder to recall?"

The reply struck Ada as being somewhat strange; moreover, it was not spoken with that easy assurance that had hitherto characterized his words.

"May I not have been averse to hearing myself extolled as a hero, knowing how little I deserve it?"

"Possibly," returned Ada, in a light, almost bantering tone; "providing you were far more modest and retiring in disposition than your present manners would lead me to suppose." Then, looking him boldly in the face, she added, "You are equivocating, Mr. Cox. Had you been more straightforward, I might have been tempted to question you further. Remember," she went on, slowly and impressively, "I am your friend; could I be less, since I owe you my very life?"

"Thank you, Miss May," returned Cox, a flash of pleasure lighting up his face. "I accept your friendship, and shall value it more than anything on earth. Speak on, then; ask what you will. Little as I have seen of you, I can trust you, and that is more than I have ever said of woman."

It was Ada's turn to flush with pleasure. She took him at his word.

"How many times have I seen you, Mr. Cox?" she began. "Thrice, is it not?"

He inclined his head.

"The first time was by moonlight, at Crag-Vurnal, on the night of Sir Guy Vurnal's return?"

Again he bowed in acquiescence.

"Then, of course, it was you who—who ap-

propriated the letter that left Sir Guy's possession that same night?"

This charge also was admitted.

"And—" Ada was resuming, when her companion interrupted her.

"Stay!" he cried, with a smile. "You are getting along too fast, Miss May. It is my turn now."

"Proceed," said Ada, quietly. "You will find that I also can be candid."

"In the first place, then, does Sir Guy know that I was prowling about his place that night?"

"No; he does not," was the reply.

"No?" he echoed, with unmistakable gratification, and some surprise. "Then he cannot suspect *me* of being the purloiner of the missing document?"

"He does not suspect *anybody*."

"And how came it that you did not impart *your* suspicions to him?"

"For reasons that would not interest you, and which could not possibly concern you, Mr. Cox," retorted Ada, with a slight blush.

"Two more questions, Miss May, and then I have done. Does Sir Guy know my appearance; and has he told any one of the contents of the document to which I have just alluded?"

"My cousin has no recollection of ever having seen your face, although you traveled on the same coach from Halton. And as to the letter," she added, impressively, "it is my belief that *its secrets* are known but to two—Sir Guy and yourself."

"And you would like to be enrolled as member No. 3 of our little band—eh, Miss May?"

"If you think me worthy of the honor, I shall be delighted," declared Ada, with a mock courtesy. "I am but a woman. Let this be my apology for prying into what does not concern me."

"Pardon me; you are one of the principal parties mentioned in this important document; for in it Sir Guy Vurnal is commanded to choose between you and your sister for a wife, provided he should return heart-whole after his two years' tour; and, of course, provided that you and Miss Garnett were free to accept his addresses."

"How very strange!" cried Ada. "I had not the slightest suspicion of this. But suppose Sir Guy fails to act according to his father's wishes or commands?"

"In that case, he is to double the liberal fortunes to which you and your sister are already entitled by the late Baronet's will."

Ada looked more surprised than ever.

"And what if neither Isabel nor I approved of the proposed alliance?"

"Then," returned Cox, "the affair would be ended; and Sir Guy might choose a wife where he would."

"Is this extraordinary document *legal*?" pursued Ada. "Is my cousin *compelled* to act according to its dictates?"

"It is compulsory so far only as a dutiful son might consider his father's dying words so."

"Ah," said Ada, a tinge of sadness in her voice, "my poor uncle had such faith in his son; and his slightest wish was as a command to Guy."

"Most estimable young man!" remarked Cox, with a half sneer.

"And now, Mr. Cox," went on Ada, "what about the secret? You have not told me *that* yet, you know?"

"All in good time, Miss May. I cannot initiate you into all our mysteries on the same day; it is against the rules of the brotherhood," he added, with mock solemnity.

"Nay, Mr. Cox, do not jest; you cannot possibly be serious?" said his companion in a disappointed tone.

"Oh, but I am, though!" he declared. "But rest assured that I shall tell you everything before you become Lady Vurnal, and mistress of Crag-Vurnal!"

This was said with a knowing look that sent the blood to Ada's cheeks.

"As you please," she returned, with offended dignity; adding, "But pray, sir, is there any necessity to remind me that you were ungentlemanly enough to play the eavesdropper?"

Nothing daunted, he retorted, "The degradation was mine, not yours, Miss May; and, as you are aware, I am not over-scrupulous."

Ada made a successful effort to recover her good-humor.

"Well, Mr. Cox," she said, with a smile, "you and I cannot afford to quarrel; besides, whatever you may say or do, I must never forget that you have saved my life, and that I am your grateful and faithful friend now and forever!"

"And in me, Miss May, you behold your most abject slave!" was the gallant reply.

"And yet," she sighed, softly, while at the same time throwing him a reproachful, yet bewitching glance—"and yet you have just refused me a very simple favor!"

"Not *refused*," he corrected; "I merely *deferred* the telling of the secret."

"But you really *will* tell it to me?"

"I swear it!"

"Then I suppose I must try and be content. And now, good-by. It must be approaching luncheon hour, and I must be off."

"Not 'good-by,' Miss May. I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you again to-day, as I intend returning Sir Guy's visit."

"We shall all be delighted to see you. Be sure to come. Mind, I shall be looking out for you!" And with a gay '*Au revoir*,' she flitted away, leaving Jasper Cox to enjoy one of the brightest day-dreams he had ever indulged in.

CHAPTER VII.

A GOOD MAN'S ECCENTRICITIES.

As Lady Vurnal had predicted, Isabel's indisposition proved but trifling. On the following day she was sufficiently recovered to be able to ride with Ada and Mr. Bevil.

Sir Guy and Mr. Cox had started for the woods upon a shooting excursion; but Mr. Bevil, who considered the indulgence of that exciting sport a wanton cruelty, preferred the society of the ladies. Thus each party followed the bent of their own inclinations.

They were, however, to meet again at the close of the day, Mr. Cox and Mr. Bevil having been invited to dine at Crag-Vurnal.

Mr. Bevil, as we have before stated, was a bachelor of forty. Moreover, he was a gentleman of many excellent qualities, and a few distinguishing characteristics, prominent among which were those that had reference to his constitution, and to that mysterious organ of the human frame—his heart.

He had been gifted—or should we say cursed?—with a heart so tender that he had been known actually to writhe at the sight of a moth fluttering round the flame of a candle.

Flesh, fish, or fowl he had not tasted for the last ten years, on the ground that it was heartlessly cruel, if not sinful, to take the life of any creature in order to satisfy a depraved and unnatural appetite.

Consequently, "the Squire" was not as healthy and robust as he might have been had he partaken of proper nourishment. But he himself believed that his constitution was *completely shattered* by reason of the debilitating effect produced upon his system from the contemplation of the wholesale destruction of life continually going on around him. Nor did he view with an eye of composure the ordinary every-day sufferings of his fellow creatures.

Protector, benefactor, friend, was this really good man to the poor and lowly. To these were devoted much of his time, and by far the greater portion of his means.

A tale of distress never gained his ear in vain. He would weep with the sorrowful and heavy-laden, administer to the sick, feed and clothe the hungry and naked.

Isabel and Mr. Bevil had all the conversation to themselves as the three rode quietly along, Ada not being in a talkative humor; indeed, she was rather out of spirits. The truth is, she felt aggrieved that her cousin and Mr. Cox should have preferred a ramble with guns and dogs, to a canter "cross country" with *her*.

Her present escort was not a particular favorite of Ada's, and when at length she condescended to address him, she did so with the intention of amusing herself at his expense.

"Mr. Bevil," she said, mischievously, "you are the most gallant gentleman I know. With what excellent good grace you have devoted

yourself to Isabel and me to-day when all the while your heart is in the woods with the sportsmen."

"Surely, Miss May," replied Mr. Bevil, in a slightly reproachful tone, "you must be aware that I could take no pleasure in the destruction of happy, innocent birds—creatures whose very helplessness, to say nothing of their beauty, should protect them."

"But they were created for man's use. You cannot deny *that*, Mr. Bevil," rejoined Ada, argumentatively.

"And are they not useful to man—in their *natural* state, I mean? If birds were annihilated, do you suppose man could exist?"

Ada shrugged her shoulders.

"You are rushing into extremes," she returned. "Why base your supposition upon an impossibility? The birds that are killed go no further toward the annihilation of the feathered tribe than do the men that fall in battle tend toward the annihilation of the human race."

"But why advocate slaughter in any form? Let man and beast live their little day!"

"With all my heart!" laughed Ada. "But battle and bloodshed always have been, and, I suppose, always will be."

"Depend upon it," returned Mr. Bevil, musingly, "there is something wrong somewhere."

"Ah, yes; indeed there is," acquiesced Ada, solemnly shaking her head; "and I'm afraid, Mr. Bevil, you have as little a chance of righting the wrong as you would have of teaching a spider that he was a cruel monster for breakfasting off a plump fly."

Mr. Bevil ignored this remark, as well as the mischievous twinkle he detected in his fair antagonist's eye. But Ada had no intention of letting him off so easily.

"Come, Mr. Bevil," she resumed, gayly, "let us have a race! This common is two miles in circumference; and there are three ditches, which are to be taken at their widest, mind. Come, let us be off!"

"Ada," remonstrated Isabel, thinking it high time to interfere, "I fear you are teasing Mr. Bevil. You forget he does not approve of horse racing, in however mild a form."

"And," put in the gentleman himself, somewhat pathetically, "the shattered state of my health would of itself prevent me from taking such violent exercise."

"Oh, dear!" cried Ada, in mock penitence; "I am always trampling upon your scruples, Mr. Bevil. Pray forgive me!"

"I beg your pardon, ladies," said Mr. Bevil, a few minutes afterward, as he drew up his horse before the cottage of a herdsman; "there is a widow with a sick child living here. I want to inquire about them. I shall not keep you a moment,"

"Could I do anything for them?" asked Isabel, eagerly.

"I think not, Miss Garnett. Mrs. West has all she wants at present, I believe; however, I will tell her of your kind wish to help her." And then he dismounted, and, having secured his horse's reins to the little garden gate, knocked at the cottage door, and was admitted.

It was a lonely dwelling; small, but clean and tidy in appearance.

"Isabel," said Ada, "perhaps this is the very widow who frightened our horses that day."

"Very likely, Ada. But what a lonely place to live! No other house in view, no sound to be heard, save the bleating of the sheep, and the distant voice of the ocean!"

Fully a quarter of an hour had elapsed when Mr. Bevil came forth. Every vestige of color had left his face; his mild blue eyes swam in tears—in a word, his countenance was indicative of the deepest suffering.

The girls were shocked at his appearance. Isabel noticed that his hands shook as with the palsy.

"Oh, Mr. Bevil!" she said, with a pitying glance, "you are ill—I am sure you are ill!"

"No, Miss Garnett," he replied, in a low, sad tone; "not more so than I always am after visiting the sick and the sorrowful. Oh, its poor, pitiful little face!—its anguish-laden eyes! So young to suffer! so helpless! so innocent! And then the agony of its heart-broken mother! That frail little life is the only tie that binds her to earth. Oh, it is a sad, sad world!"

"Poor creature!" murmured Isabel, her voice husky from emotion. "But, Mr. Bevil," she continued, in a kindly tone, "is it not very unwise of you to bring yourself into contact with such harrowing scenes—you, who are so kind-hearted, so deeply moved by the sufferings of others?"

"Ah, Miss Garnett," he replied, "if I were to deny myself the greatest pleasure I have in life—that of doing what little I can to alleviate the sorrows of the afflicted poor—I should die. It is true I pursue my work at the expense of my health; but I shall never allow that consideration to bar my progress along the road I have marked out for myself."

"I do not doubt, Mr. Bevil," persisted Isabel, "that continual emotion so violent as that to which you have but just been a prey must have injured your constitution very materially; but—pardon me if the deep interest I feel in you leads me to speak too plainly—you restrict yourself to a diet upon which it seems impossible that any one could thrive. I do so wish that we could persuade you to alter your manner of living."

Mr. Bevil shook his head.

"You are very kind, Miss Garnett," he said, gratefully; "but your wish can never be realized. And," he added, more cheerfully, "your poor cook would die of despair were there no longer any necessity for the dainty dishes she delights to concoct in order to tempt my fastidious appetite. She is quite as ingenious as my own cook, and these two are the only masters of the art I ever trouble; for, as you are aware, I never dine out except at Crag-Vurnal."

"And believe me, Mr. Bevil," said Isabel, warmly, "we fully appreciate the honor you do us."

By this time Mr. Bevil had remounted his horse, and was riding by Isabel's side, Ada being some distance ahead.

Meanwhile, our two sportsmen had made considerable havoc among the pheasants and woodcock, consequently they were in high good humor; moreover, they appeared to enjoy each other's society, and became excellent friends.

"By Jove, Sir Guy," said Cox, as they were making tracks for home, "you ought to be the happiest fellow in the world! Lord of this fine property, with a noble old mansion to live in, and two of the loveliest girls I ever saw to smile upon you,"—this with a sly glance,— "what more could mortal desire?"

"None can tell the weight of another's burden," replied the Baronet, with a sigh. Then he laughed boisterously, as if to lessen the seriousness of his remark.

"At all events, your burden cannot be very weighty. It must, indeed, be composed of 'trifles light as air,'" continued Cox.

"Talking of my cousins," resumed Sir Guy, musingly, "what a narrow escape Ada had the other day! How fortunate that you happened to be in the way! I shall never forget it!"

"Nor shall I!" said the other.

"A few minutes more, and she would have been dashed to pieces among the rocks."

"Horrible!" ejaculated Cox, with a shudder. "And she, too, the more beautiful of the sisters," he hazarded, with a sharp glance at his companion.

"What!" exclaimed Sir Guy, thoughtlessly; "you surely cannot think Ada prettier than Isabel?"

The Baronet had forgotten that there was a time—not very far off, either—when his mind was not so clear upon this point.

("Ah," thought Cox, "I see in which direction the wind blows. That is a point gained.")

"Both ladies are perfection," was his cautious reply.

And here the subject dropped.

"I quite agree with you, Ada," declared Lady Vurnal, that evening, when she and her nieces had retreated to the drawing-room after

dinner. "Mr. Cox is very agreeable and gentleman-like: His manners have that polish which foreign travel seldom fails to impart."

"I knew you would say so, aunt," replied Ada. "And, Isabel, what do you think of our new acquaintance?"

"I, too, am prepossessed in his favor. Besides his fine person and agreeable manners, there is something peculiarly pleasing in his accent—it is more than half foreign, I think."

"But, my dear children," rejoined Lady Vurnal, reflectively, "we must not form too hasty conclusions. After all, we know very little of this gentleman—in fact, we know nothing of his antecedents. I fancy, too, that he is strangely uncommunicative with regard to his own affairs. Mr. Bevil does not seem to like him, I have noticed," she added, emphatically, as though this were a weighty argument in support of the caution she was advocating.

"Pshaw!" was Ada's contemptuous comment.

"Then it is the first dislike I ever knew Mr. Bevil to entertain," said Isabel.

Shortly afterward the gentlemen came in, and after a little general conversation, Mr. Cox proposed that they should have some music.

Isabel went to the piano, and in a clear, joyous voice, sung, to the entire gratification of her audience.

Ada acquitted herself none the less brilliantly; but would only sing once, while Isabel, with her usual good nature, sung song after song to please Mr. Bevil, who was passionately fond of music.

For the remainder of the evening, Ada devoted herself exclusively to the entertainment of Mr. Cox. She played chess with him, and beat him, too. Other games, both of skill and chance, followed, with varied results. They both exerted themselves to the utmost to please, and both were pleased.

Besides her guest's entertainment and her own pleasure, the wily Ada may have had another object in view. Perhaps she wished to show Sir Guy that he was not the only man in the world—that there were others who might easily be brought to her feet. But if such were her intentions, they certainly were not productive of the desired result.

Sir Guy, Isabel, and Mr. Bevil managed to pass the evening pleasantly enough, in spite of the old adage that three are no company; while Lady Vurnal dozed contentedly in her great arm-chair.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLAYING WITH EDGED TOOLS.

THE intimacy between Ada and Jasper Cox, commenced on the evening the latter dined at Crag-Vurnal, steadily increased. Scarcely a

day passed that they did not meet in public as well as clandestinely; indeed, the latter course was more frequently adopted, both parties, for the furtherance of their own ends, preferring stolen interviews on the rocks, and even in the woods, to the interchange of a few polite conventionalities in the drawing-room at the Crag.

In the commencement of their acquaintance Ada's vanity had been gratified by the handsome stranger's ill-concealed admiration of her charms. His flattery pleased her; his conversation amused and entertained her; consequently she courted his society.

By-and-by, this intimacy very naturally ripened into something warmer. Jasper had saved Ada's life; therefore she thought him entitled to her friendship as well as her gratitude. These she willingly gave him; but he was not satisfied; he stole her heart.

But, in spite of this circumstance, Ada had not the slightest intention of relinquishing her designs upon Sir Guy. Mr. Cox was a poor man—he had told her as much—therefore marriage with him was not to be thought of. She had intended to amuse herself at his expense; she had done so wholly at her own.

In the meantime Ada had tried every expedient in her power to wean Sir Guy's affections from her rival step-sister; but all to no purpose. He was as indifferent to her attentions as unconscious of the motives that prompted them. Once only had she tried to arouse his jealousy by flirting with Cox; and once was enough to show her that such a plan would be more likely to injure her cause than to promote it.

If there were an engagement between Sir Guy and Isabel, neither Ada nor Lady Vurnal had yet heard of it; but they were both in daily expectation of an announcement to that effect.

A coolness had sprung up between the sisters, which precluded the interchange of their confidences, as of old. Upon the few occasions that they now chanced to be alone together, they conversed with the restraint of mere acquaintances.

Thus, affairs at Crag-Vurnal were progressing slowly enough, and, from Ada's point of view, unsatisfactorily. Still, she did not despair of ultimately gaining her ends. She yet had one more iron in the fire; but her chief difficulty now was how to get it out of the fire. *Sir Guy had a secret!*

In this fact lay her only remaining hope. This was the "iron" beneath the weight of which Isabel was to fall, crushed and helpless; and this was the "iron" that, beaten into links, was to form a chain that would unite Ada and Sir Guy for life—"for better, for worse."

Up to the present time Jasper Cox had managed to evade Ada's inquiries concerning Sir Guy's secret; but she was determined to be put off no longer; would suffer no more trifling.

One morning, Ada, having dressed herself with unusual care, slipped from the house by a side door, and repaired to the trysting-place, where she had promised to meet Mr. Cox. She quickly took her way along a path that led to the seaside.

The air was keen and wintry. The song of the thrush was no longer to be heard, while the occasional chant of the robin sounded shrill and joyless. Arrived at the cliffs, Ada descended, step by step, a natural stairs leading to a small, sandy beach.

As she had expected, Jasper Cox was already awaiting her. Seated upon a rock, he was quietly enjoying a cigar. This he flung away as the lady approached.

"At last you are come!" he cried. "A whole minute late! I was so anxious—so impatient! I feared you were going to disappoint me!"

She smiled as she noted his eager, lover-like air. It augured well for the success of the scheme she had in her mind.

"Did I ever disappoint?" she asked, sweetly. "Nay, am I not always punctual?"

"You are an angel!" was the rapturous response. "In the shadow of your wings I could live or die, happy and at peace with all the world. Those glorious eyes, that dazzle mine by their pure and holy brilliancy, are the only stars that beam for me. These lovely smiles are to my heart what food and shelter are to the hungry and homeless. Oh, Ada!" he added, his face aglow, his dark eyes earnest and tender; "what could recompense me for the loss of even one little minute of your sweet society?"

"Mr. Cox!—Jasper!"

"Jasper! Bless those ruby lips! 'Tis the first time that word has stained them. I *heard* a dewdrop falling from the soft, blushing petals of a rose. It fell upon my throbbing heart!"

"Nay, the dewdrop must have been fair and pure, else it would not have fallen so prettily from the rose's heart."

Having spoken thus, the color in Ada's face deepened, and her eyes fell beneath the other's ardent gaze.

He took her hand, and pressed it gently, while he murmured softly into her ear: "Sweet rose, I love you—I adore you! Let me steal your heart, to wear it forever next my own! Nay, let them blend together, making one—we its joint owner!"

Ada was but woman, after all, and found it impossible to act the unwomanly part she had marked out for herself.

She loved Jasper Cox; loved him as she could never love another. He loved her; well did she know that.

Young, and inexperienced in the ways of the world, no music could sound sweeter to Ada than did the exaggerated sentimentalism with which her lover chose to clothe the expression of his feelings. To her it was simply the language of his heart, born of a romantic soul.

Oh, how could she deceive him?

No; be false and deceitful to all the world, if need be; but to Jasper Cox she must be true. True in one sense, false in another—false to him, and false to herself.

Still, the good in her nature was now aroused in rebellion against the bad.

A mist of tears gathered in this strange girl's eyes as she once more met her companion's expectant glance. Her lovely face wore a softened and pained expression.

"Forgive me, Jasper," she faltered. "I came here to-day with the intention of deceiving you, but I cannot do it. At any other cost I would purchase the secret you hold; not at that—not at that! You will despise me, Jasper, yet I must tell you the truth—when you learn that my intentions were, to pretend to yield to your entreaties, promise to marry you, gain the secret, and then desert you!"

Instead of the frown Ada had expected to see on her lover's face, it was illumined by a radiant smile. She could have given him no greater proof of her regard than this candid confession. She was his, let her say what she would to the contrary. He saw her weakness, felt his own power; therefore might allow her a tether as long as she pleased; he would know when to pull the string.

"My sweet girl," he replied, "say or do what you please, you cannot rob me of your love!"

"It were useless to try and deceive you, Jasper. I do love you; but—"

Before she had time to prevent it, he had caught her in his arms, and snatched a kiss.

She quickly disengaged herself, however; and, though her face was scarlet from confusion, her voice was firm and calm as she said, "Jasper, this must not occur again. Understand me thoroughly when I say that I shall never marry you. As you are aware, my ambition lies in a different direction. This is the very last time I shall ever meet you alone. Nothing could change my decision."

At this, Jasper's countenance fell. All of a sudden he became the despairing, rejected suitor. It was now his turn to do a little acting.

"You do not love me Ada. I have been a blind fool! I see it all now!"

Ada's heart bled at his apparent misery.

"It matters not, Jasper," she sighed. "If

you can doubt my love, do so; it would be better thus—far better."

"How can I help doubting?" he cried, bitterly. "You are cruel, Ada; heartless. What proof have I to the contrary? If you really cared for me, you would not throw me over for another."

"You ask proof of me!" replied Ada, quickly. "Have you given any? The only favor I ever asked of you, you denied me. Tell me the secret—tell it to me, Jasper, as a proof of your love," she pleaded, earnestly.

"And will you, in return, give me a proof of your love, Ada?"

"How could I? What proof would you have?"

"Listen, Ada," he resumed, bending nearer to her. "I swear by your own sweet face that I will tell you Sir Guy's secret the very moment after you have given me the proof of your love which I shall ask of you. If you refuse, I shall then know that you do not care for me, and you shall die in ignorance of that which you so much desire to know."

He did not think it necessary to tell her that he could make a pretty fair guess at the use she intended to put the secret to, once she had it.

"And the proof, Jasper? What do you wish me to do?"

"Destroy that monument."

"What say you? Good heavens, Jasper, are your senses deserting you?" cried Ada, aghast.

"I am perfectly serious, Ada," he gravely replied. "I *hate* the monument; it is an eyesore to me. I will place a barrel of gunpowder at the foot of the narrow winding-stairs—your fair hand shall do the rest. The monument will be destroyed, and I shall know that I am beloved by the fairest and sweetest woman in the world!"

In silent astonishment Ada gazed at the originator of this wild scheme.

"Well, Ada, do you agree to my terms?"

"Jasper, I cannot believe you are in earnest. Such an extraordinary project!"

"I await your answer," urged the other, impatiently.

"Let me think a moment, Jasper. I am half confused. Help to destroy my poor uncle's monument! What a return for the great kindness I have received from Lady Vernal! You are only trying me, Jasper. You surely would not like me to act so vile and ungrateful a part?"

"Your answer?" was all he said.

"Oh, Jasper," cried the girl, in great distress, "consider what you ask of me? Were I to do as you wish, and Sir Guy should find it out, he would never forgive me. Ah," she continued, with a suspicious glance, "perhaps that is the end you have in view?"

"No, by Heaven, it is not!" he declared. "Think over the whole thing, Ada, and you will see how utterly absurd is your supposition. Remember, *I* am the chief conspirator. If you and Sir Guy quarreled through my means, you would naturally be incensed against me. Would *that* benefit me? Besides," he added, gloomily and grumblingly, "I suppose *he* is your lover, and, therefore, would not be likely to believe aught against you. Oh, never fear, Ada," he went on, carelessly; "your cousin will not suspect you, at all events. I know a plan that would prevent even the possibility of such a calamity."

"Tell it to me then," said Ada.

"It is simply this, Ada. We could shift the crime to *your sister's shoulders*—Mr. Bevil her accomplice!"

Ada started.

"Who would believe such a thing of *them*?" she cried. "What motive could *they* have for the commission of such an act?"

"I tell you, Ada, it could be done. Put your trust in me, and you will have no cause to regret it."

And there and then, Jasper Cox unfolded as diabolical a plot as was ever hatched.

To do her justice, Ada recoiled from the whole business; and it was some time ere his entreaties overcame her scruples. But at length she gave in.

"Jasper," she said, "I will do this base thing—for *your sake*."

Besides the reasons assigned to Ada, Cox had other and more powerful ones for acting in the extravagant manner he proposed. It is true, the monument in Glimmermere was an eyesore to him; in fact, as he had said, he hated the sight of it. But he hated the Vurnal family ten times more. It would be an intense gratification to him to sow a disunion between Sir Guy and his intended bride. Moreover, if he succeeded in preventing the Baronet from marrying either of the sisters, his own intended bride's fortune would be doubled, no matter what might become of poor, wrongfully-accused Isabel.

Thus, the strange test that was to prove Ada's love for Cox was also to overthrow a monument, rob Sir Guy of the girl he loved, provide Jasper himself with a rich wife, and at the same time to wreak an unholy vengeance upon a family whom he considered he had cause to hate.

As Ada and her lover were about to part company, Jasper chanced to cast a glance up at the cliff above their heads. "That woman!" he ejaculated. "What does she want staring at us like that?"

Ada turned her eyes in the same direction, and lo! upon the extreme end of a projecting rock, she beheld the "Woman in Black," the widow whom Ada had such good cause to re-

member. She was too far off to overhear what the lovers were saying; still, they were anything but pleased at seeing her there.

"I do believe," cried Ada, half in earnest, half in jest, "that that horrid woman is my evil genius!"

CHAPTER IX.

A SHATTERED IDOL.

"ISABEL, I wish you would put by your work, and come for a stroll with me as far as the steward's cottage," said Sir Guy, on that same day, about an hour after Ada had left the house to keep her appointment with Jasper Cox.

"With pleasure, Guy," replied Isabel, cheerfully.

She was seated in a window-recess, her lap full of many-colored wools.

"Isabel," put in Lady Vurnal, from the other side of the room, as she slowly laid aside her book and spectacles—"Isabel, do you not think Ada spends too much time in her room? I seldom see her now before luncheon time," she added, in what was, for her, an unusually querulous tone.

"Indeed, aunt, now that you draw my attention to the subject, Ada does seclude herself too much. It is not good for her to be so much alone. I shall go and ask her to come out with us." And Isabel rose and left the room, her conscience whispering to her that she had not been so solicitous of Ada's company of late as she might have been. But of course she searched in vain for her step-sister; so, having put on her hat and cloak, she returned to the sitting-room. "Ada is not in the house, aunt," she said. "No doubt we shall find her in the garden. Come, Guy; I am ready."

On the lawn they met the gardener who informed them that "Miss Adar have gone towards the cliffs better than an hour since."

"Then we may as well walk in that direction, Isabel," said Sir Guy. "And I can leave you with Ada, and go round to the steward's afterward. I have business with him that will delay me some time, so I will not ask you to come with me."

"Very well, Guy," agreed Isabel. And then they walked on.

For some minutes more, neither spoke. Sir Guy's manner was moody and abstracted. Isabel, too, was not quite herself to-day. She longed to talk in her usual free and unconstrained manner; yet, when she essayed to do so, a presentiment of something about to happen—something, that sent her heart throbbing wildly—rose up within her, and repelled the impulse. So she silently tripped along by her companion's side, her head drooping, her eyes resolutely fixed upon the ground.

At last Guy spoke.

"Isabel," he began, slowly and thoughtfully, "I have often wished to speak to you upon a subject that nearly concerns my future happiness; but, somehow or other, I have always lacked courage to do so. Oh, Isabel! if you were to turn against me, my misery would be complete! But I have been vain enough to hope that I am not wholly indifferent to you; so I have at last made up my mind to know my fate. But before I proceed further I must make you acquainted with an unhappy truth that I fear will both distress and surprise you very much. Shall I proceed, Isabel? or do you bid me cease?"

"Guy," she returned, in a low tone of voice, "if you think me worthy to share your confidence, believe me, I shall never abuse the privilege. I am ready and willing to hear anything you may have to say to me."

"Then, I was right, dear Isabel; you *do* care for me—a little?" said Sir Guy, eagerly, his face lighting up with unmistakable pleasure.

But just as Isabel was about to answer him as her heart dictated, old Brown, the Baronet's steward, stood before them.

"Beg your pardon, Sir Guy," he said, respectfully, while taking off his hat to Isabel. "I heard at the house you wished to speak to me, so I thought I'd just follow you, as I saw you in the distance."

As may be supposed, Sir Guy was not very well pleased at this interruption, but he was obliged to disguise his chagrin with what good grace he could muster.

"Very good, Brown. I shall be with you in a moment," he said. Then turning to Isabel, he added, "I am afraid I must leave you, Isabel. But you will be sure to find Ada on the rocks." Then in a low tone he whispered, "After dinner, to-night, in the conservatory."

Isabel nodded and smiled.

"Oh, don't mind me, Guy!" she cried, gaily. "Business before pleasure, you know!"

With this she turned and walked away, Sir Guy and his steward going off in the opposite direction.

Isabel, disappointed, it is true, yet all unconscious of the bitter trouble that she was hastening to meet, pursued her solitary way to the cliffs. Arrived there, she had a second vain search for her sister.

The truth is, while she was on her way to the rocks, Ada had set out on her return to the Crag by a circuitous but less frequented route; consequently they had missed each other.

Having searched every nook where she thought it likely Ada might have been, Isabel, weary from walking and climbing, sat down to rest and to think.

Poor girl! these were the last few moments of happiness she was destined to know for many days to come.

And she was happy then.

The love-light shone from her sweet violet eyes, and the smile of peace and hope played about her rosy lips.

"He loves me—he loves me!" was the burden of her thoughts.

But stay! what sound is that?

Surely she could not have been mistaken. Yes, there it is again—a low, sobbing murmur, mingling strangely with the sullen voice of the waves as they roll lazily in upon the beach.

Isabel is not long in discovering the source whence that piteous sound proceeds. Not many yards lower down the cliff sits the drooping figure of a woman, a sleeping infant in her lap. She is dressed in deep mourning, her long widow's vail being thrown back over her bonnet.

While descending to the poor creature's side, these words, accompanied by broken sobs, are borne to Isabel's ears: "My poor fatherless babe! Live, for your heartbroken mother, and she will live for you—for you alone!"

Isabel gently placed a hand upon the sorrowing mother's shoulder.

The woman started, and as she looked up at Isabel a convulsive shudder ran through her frame. In years she was young—not more than thirty, perhaps—but her dark hair was already plentifully streaked with gray, while her face was worn and pinched, though still beautiful. Her coal-black eyes, so full of pain, looked unnaturally large and brilliant by contrast with the death-like pallor of her skin. Her refined and delicate features bespoke her a person of gentle birth, although her garments, being much the worse for wear, would not help to sustain the supposition.

"Forgive me, madam," faltered Isabel at length, "if I intrude upon your privacy, but I could not bear to see you suffer in solitude. Do not send me from you! Let me try to comfort you."

"Don't speak to me—don't touch me!" almost shrieked the stranger, covering up her baby with her cloak, and shrinking from Isabel as though she had been some loathsome animal.

"Poor creature! Perhaps her troubles have turned her brain," thought Isabel. "Don't be angry with me," she again ventured to say. "Indeed, indeed, I pity you very much, and it would make me so happy to be of the slightest service to you."

"Go away!—go away, I tell you!" cried the strange woman, rudely. "Oh, you think I do not know you—but I do! I know you but too well! Your flaxen hair, your beautiful face! Go away, go away!"

Isabel was beginning to be afraid of the poor creature, she looked so wild and excited. Yet she would make one more attempt to soothe her.

"I assure you," she declared, quietly, "I never have harmed you. Why do you dislike me so much?"

"Dislike you! Just Heaven!—dislike you!" was the almost fierce reply—"I *hate* you! You cannot deceive *me*. Do you think I did not see you with *him*? Oh, you need not start yet. I watched you both—I saw you part company a few minutes ago. Ah, I know your secret—you love him, and he loves you. But, mark me,"—this with a sort of fiendish delight—"he first loved me, and better than he now loves you!"

And then she stood up and faced Isabel, her dark eyes flashing defiance.

Her bewildered auditor staggered as though she had been struck.

"Ah!" went on the woman, quickly, "you did not know that, perhaps. Then I will tell you more. Listen! I met that bad man in a small town on the coast of France. He wooed and won me, and we were married"—a stifled scream from Isabel—"married, as I thought. But some time afterward I discovered that I had never been his wife—that it was one of his gay friends who had performed the mock ceremony of our marriage. Not many weeks ago, he cruelly deserted me, and came to England. I tracked him, step by step, to Glimmermere. He does not know that I am here. These widow's weeds have baffled him, as they have been my protection against the finger of scorn. I can bide my time. Let my husband—for he is my husband in the sight of Heaven—let him, I say, go north or south, east or west, thither will I follow him—his shadow—his Nemesis! All I crave is justice for my child—my child and his!" And then she passionately kissed the still sleeping infant.

"Can this be true?" groaned Isabel, from the depths of her despair. She was leaning heavily against a rock to support her failing limbs.

"Go to the altar with the man you love; but, remember, I shall be there also. You are not married yet!"

"Married!" echoed Isabel, stung to the quick—"married to such a man as that?" Never!

And, with these words, Isabel endeavored to calm her feelings, summoning dignity to her aid.

"You will not marry him?" repeated the other, half incredulously.

"Certainly not! How can you ask me such a question?"

"Forgive me," said the other, softening as her companion began to freeze. "My own sufferings make me callous to those of others. You are good and pure as you look; and I am sorry for you. Do you intend to tell my husband of this interview?"

"It shall be as you please."

"Perhaps it would be better not. Leave him to me. And as I said before, I can bide my time. Besides,"—and a half-frightened look came into her face—"besides, his anger would be so great, that he might kill me!"

Isabel shuddered, and covered her face with her hands. It was dreadful to hear Guy Vurnal spoken of in this manner. Yet did he not deserve it? Was he not a villain of the blackest die?"

When Isabel uncovered her face she was alone. The dark-robed stranger had disappeared, leaving sorrow and desolation behind her.

It was then that Isabel's grief burst forth. She sunk down upon the hard, cold rock, and wept long and bitterly o'er her vanished faith in the goodness of the male sex; for what man on earth could she dare to trust, since her cousin Guy was false and unworthy?

"Oh," she mourned aloud, "it is too dreadful to believe; yet there is no room for doubt. Why should that poor creature deceive me? Oh, Guy, Guy! how can I look upon your face again? You, who could talk like a saint of the 'wrong-doing of others!' What did he mean by *that*, I wonder? False! false!—he only intended to mislead me as to the real nature of his anxiety. No wonder that his conscience troubles him! Oh! how can he ever know an instant's peace?"

CHAPTER X.

SPURNED.

IN the meantime Ada had returned home, and had been mildly lectured by her aunt upon the impropriety of indulging in solitary long walks. The lecture she bore with equanimity; but it was with feelings nearly bordering upon alarm that she learnt that Sir Guy and Isabel had gone out.

Latterly Ada had been anxious to prevent her sister and cousin from being left alone together; and many a sweet little *tete-a-tete* had she been the means of abruptly terminating, apparently in the most innocent manner possible.

She was, however, agreeably surprised to see Sir Guy return alone. Unluckily, though, for the continuance of her peace of mind, she was not long in perceiving that the Baronet's spirits were very considerably elevated; indeed, she had not seen him in so happy a mood since his return from abroad.

"Halloa, Ada, you little witch!" he cried, cheerily, as that young lady ran out into the hall to meet him. "A nice wild-goose chase you gave Isabel and me to-day! Mother declared she would lock you up in the coal-cellar!"

"Very kind of her ladyship, I'm sure!" retorted the girl, pertly. "But may I ask, sir, where have *you* been all the morning?"

"By Jove, you may, Ada! And remember, I shall exact your pity when you have heard my mournful tale. Know, then, that for the last two hours I have been trying to get through a little business with the slowest, the most tedious of mankind—old Brown, my steward. Oh, that he were done brown on a toasting-fork!"

"And where, in the name of goodness, have you left Isabel?"

"Did she not come home with you?" exclaimed the other, in surprise.

"Me? I never saw her!"

"Then she must be looking for you all this time. How unfortunate that you should have missed each other. I'll go and meet her." And Sir Guy made a rush for his hat, and was off before one could say "Jack Robinson!"

"Well, this is really too bad!" thought Ada, stamping her little foot with vexation. Then she ran to the door with the intention of asking her cousin to wait for her, as she had quickly made up her mind to accompany him.

She had her hand on the handle of the door, which stood ajar, when she heard footsteps outside. She paused, and listened. Sir Guy's voice was borne to her ear. "You look tired, Isabel. I'm afraid you have fatigued yourself walking so much."

Ada did not catch the reply, which was uttered in a very low tone.

Again the Baronet spoke; and now the two were close up to the door.

"You will not forget our appointment, Isabel—in the conservatory after dinner?"

"Guy," came the answer—firmly, distinctly, coldly—"Guy, I shall *not* meet you in the conservatory. I have nothing whatever to say to you; and you cannot possibly have any communication to make that would interest me. I must entreat you never again to address me in the manner you did this morning."

"As you please, Isabel," was the haughty reply.

The door was then pushed open, and Ada had barely time to dart back behind it. Then Isabel entered, and walked quickly along the hall, never turning her head; but, as she passed by, Ada distinctly heard a stifled sob.

Sir Guy lingered awhile on the steps.

"Spurned, and by *her*!" he muttered, audibly to the listener behind the door. "Vain, heartless coquette!"

Then he descended the steps, and Ada stole away to her own room, more astonished, perhaps, by the short colloquy she had overheard than she had ever been in the whole course of her life before.

At dinner that evening, Sir Guy made a mighty effort to appear unconcerned.

"She shall not see the deep wound she has dealt me!" was his inward cry.

Nevertheless, she did see that his gayety was

forced; and if anything could now have at all raised him in her estimation, it was this fact, which showed that he was not utterly depraved.

Later on in the evening, to the relief of more than one of the little family circle, Mr. Bevil "dropped in."

"You have come just at the right moment, Mr. Bevil," said Ada. "Go now and prescribe for Isabel; she is not well."

Of course Mr. Bevil declared himself deeply grieved at this sad piece of news. Then he seated himself beside the fair invalid on the sofa.

"Now she will soon be well," whispered Ada to Sir Guy, in a meaning tone. They were standing near the piano at the other side of the room.

"I was not aware that Frank Bevil is a proficient in the healing art."

Ada laughed, mockingly.

"You are so innocent, Guy! Where are your eyes?"

"I don't understand you, Ada."

"Then I shall not speak any plainer. I must not reveal my sister's little secrets."

And then she left him to draw his own conclusions.

"Can it be possible that there is an attachment between those two?" he asked himself, uneasily. Then, word for word, he recalled the conversation he had had with Isabel on this very subject, when she had confessed to a great respect and admiration for their eccentric neighbor. "It may be so," he thought. "There is no accounting for taste."

Before Mr. Bevil took his departure that night, Isabel found an opportunity of making some inquiries respecting the supposed widow.

But he knew little or nothing about her. Her name was West, he said, and he believed she had very lately lost her husband, poor thing.

And that was all Mr. Bevil knew.

CHAPTER XI.

PROOF POSITIVE.

It was a cold blustery night, dismally dark, save when the crescent moon rode quickly over an occasional patch of streaky blue sky, to be engulfed again by the scudding, murky clouds.

Gloomy discontent seemed to brood o'er the earth. The wind whistled mournfully through the trees, which were now but scantily clad, for winter's icy fingers had already begun to wander destructively amid the leafy tresses whereupon were stamped the bronzed smiles of gladsome autumn.

The old gray walls of Crag-Vurnal were shrouded in the deepest gloom. The ancient pile looked like some hoary monster in slum-

ber, the tall trees standing around like gaunt sentries keeping guard.

The windows were dark, all save one—Sir Guy's.

Though it was close upon twelve o'clock, the young Baronet had not yet retired to rest. He sat at the open window, a cigar between his fingers, his gaze directed upward at the lowering heavens, where a single star, straight above his head, sent forth its pitying smile—its feeble ray of hope.

Long and earnestly he gazed upon the twinkling gem; but at length the greedy clouds seized upon it, and it vanished—vanished like a sweet, holy thought.

Then all was gloom.

"How like the star of my life!" thought Sir Guy. "A little while it illumined my cloudy way, then it died out forever, and left me to grope in utter darkness. Hark! One! two! three! four! five! six! seven! eight! nine! ten! eleven! twelve! Oh, Heaven! what's that?"

One by one Sir Guy had counted the strokes of the village clock, and as the twelfth one died away, a low, sullen explosion seemed to shake the very heavens. The sound proceeded from the neighborhood of Glimmermere, which, it will be remembered, was situated about a quarter of a mile from Crag-Vurnal.

A few minutes more, and the young man was hastily pursuing his way toward the village. Arrived there, he was scarcely surprised to find the little place in a state of the wildest commotion. Lanterns, and even torches, were flashing hither and thither like so many gigantic will-o'-the-wisps.

Cries of "Fire!" and "Murder!" were mingled with curses and exclamations of astonishment.

Sir Guy strode into the midst of a noisy group, demanding, "What is the matter, my good people?"

"Oh, Lord!" came the voice of Andy Rhodd from the center of the motley crowd: "it's the Baronet himself!"

Then he elbowed his way to the gentleman's side, closely followed by Jasper Cox.

"Oh, your worship," screamed an old woman, "it's the Rushions! The village is be-seadged! All our windows are broke; and your own beautiful monument is bu'st up!"

"Oh, dear sir!" groaned a low, solemn voice, at the bewildered gentleman's side, "the devil must have broken loose!"

"An earthquake! An earthquake!" roared another.

"No, you fool; 'twas a thunderbolt!"

"Don't mind them, your worship; it was lightning! Didn't I see the flash with my own two eyes?"

"Silence, ye set of jabbering idiots!" cried the shrill voice of the innkeeper.

"What the deuce is all this about?" exclaimed Sir Guy, losing patience.

"It is just this, master," explained Andrew Rhodd. "There has been an attempt to blow up the monument."

"What!" ejaculated Sir Guy, aghast.

"Come and see for yourself, sir!"

Sure enough, the destruction of the monument had been attempted.

Two or three large blocks of marble had been shifted from their places, while some smaller stones had entirely disappeared. The small oak door at the mouth of the narrow winding stairs that ascended to the clock, had also been blown away, together with its entire framework.

No other damage had yet been discovered, save a few broken windows in the houses opposite. The police could do nothing in the matter until daylight.

"It is the most unaccountable thing I ever heard of!" declared Sir Guy, turning to Jasper Cox, who was standing by his side.

"Yes, indeed!" acquiesced Cox; adding, "I never got such a start in the whole course of my life!"

"You may say that, Mr. Cox," put in the innkeeper, who looked ready to explode himself. "I thought you would have bounded stark through the ceiling, sir. You see, Sir Guy," exclaimed Andy, growing voluble at the recollection, "Mr. Cox, being lonely and dejected like, had kindly asked me to share a bottle of old port with him in his own room; and I was just saying 'Good-night' to the gentleman, when, bang! whew! Oh, Mr. Cox, I believe we did jump! And Cora (that's my daughter, Corabella, gentlemen) she rolled down-stairs, bottles, and glasses, and all. Oh, dear, sir, if you'll believe a sober man's word, it sounded for all the world like Bedlam; and ever since there's such a din and singin' in my ears, that I hardly know wether I'm standing upon my head or my heels!"

Shortly afterward Sir Guy was about to set out on his return home, when Jasper Cox, who had got possession of a lantern, volunteered to accompany him part of the way. Sir Guy objected, the other persisted, and eventually they walked on together.

"We had better go the short cut through the glen," said Cox.

"As you please," was the indifferent reply.

"How astonished your mother and cousins will be when they hear the news!" went on Cox, musingly.

"I'm afraid my mother will be deeply grieved. My father's tomb could hardly be more sacred to her than is the monument in Glimmermere," replied Sir Guy, in a sad tone of voice.

"I saw Miss Garnett in the village to-day.

Little did she think how near she was to taking her last view of the monument!"

"Was she alone?"

"Yes; but I think I saw Mr. Bevil join her as she was leaving the village. I say, Vurnal, what's that at your feet? Looks like a letter."

"Oh, it's only a dirty piece of paper, I suppose." But as he spoke Sir Guy stooped, and picked up the object under discussion. It was a neatly-folded letter. Cox immediately turned the full light of the lantern upon it; and Sir Guy, half unconsciously, ran his eye down the page. He started violently. Then, merely saying it was a letter his cousin must have accidentally lost when she passed that way in the morning, he hastily thrust it into his breast coat-pocket.

His companion made no remark, and they proceeded on their way in silence.

Jasper Cox good-naturedly insisted upon going all the way to Crag-Vurnal; then he shook hands with his companion, and they separated.

Sir Guy admitted himself by means of a latch-key, and at once repaired to his own room. Having lighted a candle, he took the stray letter from his pocket, and read it three or four times over.

"Monday evening.

"DEAREST ISABEL,—

"I have just received your letter, and am rejoiced to learn that you have treated your cousin's proposal with the contempt it merited. Doubtless he would not have wasted his precious breath so vainly had he known that it was your fairy fingers that spirited away that very interesting document in the handwriting of his unworthy father on the night of his (Sir Guy's) return to the dishonored home of his ancestors.

"Forgive me, my precious one, if I have dared to doubt your love! How could I be certain that you preferred me—a shattered reed—to your gay and more youthful admirer? But now, darling, you have given me proof infallible, and I have just cause to be the happiest of men!

"After all, had I an ounce of brains, I must have known that you could not but hate Sir Guy, knowing what you do. Did you notice what a sharp eye he kept upon us the last night I called in to see you? I could not whisper even one little word on the sly.

"And so, sweetheart, you have also doubted my love, and you now demand a proof of its existence? Be it so. I am powerless to resist where you command. I am ready to show you, in the strange manner you yourself have chosen, that I am yours, and yours only. In the name of justice, then, we will plight our mutual faith in each other; and by the destruction of the living lie that stands in the village square I will show you how much I love you, and detest the foul wrong that has existed for so many years—since in no other way can I satisfy you that I am yours heart and soul.

"Listen, then, dear love, at twelve o'clock to-morrow night, and you will hear the voice of justice crying very loudly.

"I shall now take this scroll to our secret post-office in the old crab-tree, hoping that it will fall into your hands at an early hour in the morning.

"Farewell, my beloved!

"YOURS UNTIL DEATH."

In a state of the utmost perturbation Sir Guy paced up and down his room. What was

he to believe? What could he believe save the black and white evidence before him?

"Oh, Isabel! Isabel!" he muttered, hoarsely; rather would I have followed you to your grave than know you the base, heartless, revengeful creature this letter proclaims you!" Then he threw himself into a chair, only to continue his soliloquy. "So it was she that stole the letter that night! Good heavens, how well she has acted! What consummate deceit! I cannot believe it! Alas! alas! I must! Oh, that this damning proof could vanish from my sight! Bevil's peculiar handwriting could not be mistaken; and if *she* had not told him what passed between us the other day, how could he have known it?"

Thus Sir Guy sorrowed over his cousin's supposed perfidy. But now that his thoughts had turned upon Frank Bevil, his grief was converted into rage.

"Canting hypocrite! idiot! madman!" he again burst forth. "I never had much faith in him. Yet how can I blame him, since he is not answerable for his actions? He is mad; he *must* be mad, else he would never have undertaken this wild, senseless scheme. And Isabel to have urged him on! It is unaccountable, monstrous! What do they intend to do next, I wonder? Well, well, we shall see! Of one thing, however, am I certain; and that is, while I live, I will never again place the slightest faith in woman!" And with this reflection, Sir Guy retired to rest, but not to sleep.

CHAPTER XII.

GROPING IN THE DARK.

DAYLIGHT had scarcely dawned the next morning when the household at Crag-Vurnal was made acquainted with the attempted destruction of the monument, so that it was not reserved for Sir Guy to be the bearer of unpleasant tidings. On leaving his room he proceeded to that of his mother. She, poor old lady, regarding the cowardly work of the previous night as a slight cast upon her husband's memory, took the affair very much to heart; so much so, indeed, that she was unable to leave her room for some days.

Having done his best to comfort his mother, Sir Guy descended to the breakfast room, where Isabel and Ada already awaited him. The former, who presided at the head of the table, could not forbear a glance of sympathy as she wished her cousin "Good-morning." Of late she had completely lost her cheerful spirits; she seldom smiled, and her old joyous laugh was never heard. Ada, on the contrary, had become merry and light-hearted. Thus the girls seemed to have changed dispositions.

During breakfast, Ada was the only one of

the trio that seemed at her ease. She wondered and speculated incessantly as to the probable perpetrator of the "frightful deed," his motives, etc., etc.

Just as they rose from table, who should they see coming across the lawn but Mr. Bevil, wearing his longest face and most doleful aspect.

"Show Mr. Bevil into the library," said Sir Guy to a servant. Then, turning to Isabel, he added, in a hard, stern voice: "Can you, also, spare me a few minutes in the library?"

"Certainly, Guy," she replied, quietly, though she was somewhat surprised at the request.

They left the room together.

"I shall make my escape," thought Ada, smiling to herself. And then she stole up to her room, hastily dressed herself, and in a few minutes more was making her way toward the trysting-place under the cliffs.

Meanwhile a somewhat exciting interview was taking place in the library. When Sir Guy and Isabel entered, Mr. Bevil came forward the very picture of distress.

"Oh, Sir Guy," he began dolefully, "what a wicked world it is! Of course, you are very much hurt about this Glimmermere affair. And poor Lady Vurnal—how is she? Do you think she would like to see me?"

The young Baronet handed Isabel a chair, and motioned his visitor to another. When they were seated, he replied, in a voice so stern that Isabel almost started: "You are very kind, Mr. Bevil. But I think my mother can dispense with your condolences. Pray do not waste such good acting on so unappreciative an audience as myself. I may as well at once inform you that I know all. Isabel, the letter you received from Mr. Bevil on Monday is now in my possession. No doubt, you have missed it ere this. You dropped it yesterday on your way to or from the village. I found it, and considered myself justified in reading it.

Isabel and Mr. Bevil exchanged glances of the wildest astonishment. At last the girl found her voice.

"Explain yourself, Guy. I don't understand you."

"Isabel," was the reply, spoken in an almost pathetic tone, "what have I or my family done to you that you should hate us so bitterly?"

"Hate you, Guy!" she repeated, wonderingly. Then, blushing, and casting her eyes on the ground, she added, "If you allude to—to—my refusal to encourage your attentions, Guy, I have only to say look into your own heart, and then tell me if it is strange that my womanly instincts should bid me shun your society."

Sir Guy looked as he felt—deeply shocked and grieved.

"I am sorry, Isabel, I am very sorry indeed, to find you so hardened—so heartless—so utterly depraved!"

Poor Isabel was speechless with surprise and indignation.

Sir Guy handed her a letter, saying, "I am quite prepared to hear you assert that you never saw this before."

She merely glanced at it, then returned it.

"You are quite right, Guy," she answered, rather haughtily. "I never saw it before. It was never intended for me, let the writer be whom he may."

"Of course it is not your handwriting?" resumed the Baronet, handing the document to Mr. Bevil, who read it through, an anxious, perplexed look upon his kind face.

"Yes, Sir Guy," he said, slowly, and as if speaking against his will; "it is my writing—I cannot deny it." And then he pressed one hand to his forehead, while he cast a look of helpless entreaty at Isabel.

"You see, Isabel," said Sir Guy, not angrily, but sorrowfully, "it is useless to deny it. I pity and forgive you, because I have loved you. Oh, Isabel! Isabel!" he continued, his voice husky from emotion, "once I believed you little less than an angel! How great is your fall! How bitter my regret and disappointment!"

White, tearful, and quivering in every limb, rose Isabel, with the air of an insulted queen. She looked like a stately lily in a shower; and not, as Sir Guy had expected to have seen her, like a bruised one in a thunder-storm.

"Mr. Bevil," she demanded, "did you write this letter to me?"

"Oh, Isabel," groaned her cousin, "he has confessed his guilt. Do not seek to pervert your accomplice!"

"Be kind enough to answer me, Mr. Bevil?" went on the girl, ignoring the other's remark.

"Oh, Miss Garnett!" cried Bevil, despairingly, while he wrung his hands in a helpless sort of manner,— "oh, Miss Garnett, forgive me! Think of my weakened constitution, my shattered health! Alas! I now see my intellect will not long survive. I suppose I wrote this letter. I must have written it, since it is my writing. But I never saw it with my waking eyes. As you are aware, I am a somnambulist. I often write in my sleep. I cannot help it. It is one of the consequences resulting from my wretched health."

Here Mr. Bevil broke down completely, and buried his face in his hands.

Isabel gazed from one to the other of the gentlemen, growing more bewildered each moment.

"Like all other abominable falsehoods."

broke forth Sir Guy, now, for the first time, getting angry, "your explanation is lame. Pray, Mr. Bevil, who told you of what occurred between my cousin and me the other day? And perhaps you will explain how you became possessed of the contents of the stolen document, if Isabel did not make you her confidant, as this letter plainly shows she did?"

"It is all a mystery to me, Sir Guy," groaned Bevil, as Isabel took the unlucky letter from his nerveless clasp. "My mind must have wandered forth while my body slumbered, and held communion with yours or Miss Garnett's. I have heard of such things before now!"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Sir Guy, contemptuously. "I suppose you were also asleep when you attempted the destruction of the monument?"

"The monument!" exclaimed the other man, excitedly, as he started to his feet. "That is true, Sir Guy. I could not possibly have done that in my sleep. In Heaven's name, what does it all mean? Could some one else have written this strange letter after all, and imitated my handwriting so perfectly? No, no, no! It could not be. I have proof to the contrary. I am the villain! I am the madman! Oh, Sir Guy, have me confined immediately, ere I perpetrate some other dreadful deed. Awake, I am weak and harmless: asleep, I must be strong and dangerous!" And again the poor man sunk into a chair, and actually sobbed in his great distress.

"Yes," thought Sir Guy, "he is mad, and therefore not so much to blame as Isabel. But as to writing the letter in his sleep, that is all moonshine. Mr. Bevil," he said, aloud, and in a softened tone of voice, "just read over the letter once more, and you will see how impossible and absurd your explanation is."

By this time Isabel had read the letter. She knew not what to think of its contents. It seemed impossible that Mr. Bevil could have addressed such language to her, unless he were, indeed, mad. And then the writer appeared to be aware of what had taken place between the Baronet and herself. This, in itself, looked mysterious, since it seemed that neither of them had spoken to any one of the circumstance.

Isabel laid her hand upon Bevil's shoulder, as she said, persuasively, "Mr. Bevil, pray consider what you are saying. This letter accuses me of stealing an important document, which I assure you I never saw. And then you would never have written to me in that strain. You have never led me to believe—that is to say, I have never heard you profess—" Here she broke down, blushing with confusion.

"Alas, Miss Garnett!" faltered Bevil; "this is the greatest proof I have that I must have

written the letter. I love you, Isabel—have loved you long and devotedly; but I have never breathed a word of my love to any mortal. I would not be so presumptuous. Therefore, how could any one but myself have written the secret feelings of my own heart? As to the rest of the letter, it is a mystery to me. But, Sir Guy," he went on, turning to the Baronet, and speaking in a clear impressive tone, "you have wronged Miss Garnett. She is pure and unsullied as an angel. Of that I would willingly stake my life."

"Would to Heaven I could believe you!" was all Sir Guy said.

"You are at liberty to believe what you like, sir," cried Isabel, haughtily; and then she rushed from the room, that he might not have the satisfaction of seeing her tears.

Sir Guy continued to question Bevil for some time longer, but he could gain no further information. He was sadly perplexed. He could neither make up his mind what to think or how to act.

"Mr. Bevil," he said, at length, "if you have been speaking the truth, you will respect my wish to have this affair kept a secret. I could have you arrested if I chose; but I do not see how that would mend matters. I shall place the affair in the hands of a competent detective. Have you anything more to say to me?"

"Nothing, Sir Guy. I have spoken the truth to the best of my belief, so help me Heaven!"

CHAPTER XIII.

SOMETHING WRONG SOMEWHERE.

A LADY wishes to see you, Sir Guy."

"To see me, Thomas? You must be mistaken."

"Beg pardon, sir; I am quite correct."

"Then I suppose you had better show her into the drawing-room. Who is the lady?"

"Wouldn't give her name, Sir Guy. Said she was a stranger to you; but had come on very important business."

"Very well, Thomas. I shall see her."

This short colloquy took place in the library on the evening of the day upon which the events recorded in our last chapter occurred.

Sir Guy had been seated before the fire, plunged in deep thought, when he was disturbed by the entrance of his servant.

That day, Ada, and Sir Guy had dined *tete-a-tete*, Lady Vurnal and Isabel being confined to their own rooms, the latter making a severe headache a pretext for her seclusion.

Had he been less engrossed by his own thoughts, Sir Guy must have noticed something unusual in his companion's demeanor during dinner. She, too, was thoughtful, and pre-occupied, and ever and anon she looked sharply up into his face, an expression of blended surprise, curiosity, and triumph in her own

Dinner over, she betook herself to her aunt's apartments, with the laudable purpose of keeping the invalided old lady company. Thus Sir Guy, nothing loth, was left to himself.

Having executed his master's orders with reference to the lady visitor, Thomas, the footman, retired to his own dominions; but he had not been many minutes there when the drawing-room bell rung in a domineering sort of manner, which seemed to say, "Answer me, Thomas, or leave the house!"

Thomas, accordingly, chose the former course.

"Thomas," said Sir Guy, when that worthy presented himself, "ask Miss Isabel if she is well enough to come down for a few minutes. Say that I wish to speak to her particularly."

"Very well, Sir Guy."

"And, Thomas," added the Baronet, after a moment's thought, as he rose and went over to the man's side, "hasten as fast as you can to the village, and ask Mr. Cox to be good enough to step over here, if he has nothing better to do. Say nothing more, mind—*nothing!*"

These orders were given in a tone too low to reach the visitor's ear.

Isabel immediately responded to her cousin's summons.

She entered the room slowly, looking pale and very ill. Even after what had passed, Sir Guy could hardly prevent his anxiety and pity from gushing forth in loving words of forgiveness, as his glance rested upon that fair, grief-stricken countenance.

But the kindly impulse was checked as he noticed Isabel's start of surprise when she saw the dark-robed figure sitting by his side, for the visitor was none other than she whom we have before spoken of as the "Woman in Black."

"There is no need for me to introduce you to this lady, Isabel," began Sir Guy, half-bitterly. "I see you are already acquainted with Mrs. West."

To say that the young Baronet was very much surprised at what followed would but ill portray his feelings.

Isabel paused for a moment, and a slight blush suffused her cheeks; then the color fled as quickly as it had come, leaving her ashen pale, while a sweet, sad smile flickered across her countenance. She quietly approached the supposed widow, shook hands with her, and, bending her golden head, imprinted a kiss upon her forehead.

"I am glad to see you here," she said, falteringly. "May your future be as happy and bright as your past has been sad and clouded!" And then the big tears rolled down Isabel's pale cheeks as she turned to Sir Guy, saying, "Guy, you have wronged me very deeply; but I forgive you from my heart. Now you understand why I acted toward you as I did the other day, for it was on that very morning,

after I parted from you and the steward, that I met this lady, who then confided to me her secret. Oh, Guy, be kind to her, and make her a good husband, and Heaven will bless your union, and forgive you the wrongs you have done her!"

And then she quietly took hold of the Baronet's hand, and, her hot tears bedewing it, was about to place it in that of the astonished visitor.

But Sir Guy broke through the amazed spell that her words had produced.

"Isabel, you are ill—very ill. You should not have left your room."

She looked disappointed, and cast a glance of reproach upon him; then turned to Mrs. West—for such is the name that this lady went by.

"Then you two have not made friends, after all? Does he refuse to make amends for the wrongs he has done you?"

"Wrongs!" exclaimed the other lady. "What do you mean? Sir Guy Vurnal has never wronged me in any way, that I am aware of."

"What!" cried Isabel, astonished in her turn; "did you not tell me the other day that he was your—your husband?"

"No, Miss Garnett. You must have misunderstood me. I alluded to the person whom you probably know by no other name than Jasper Cox."

"Jasper Cox!" repeated the girl, wildly. "Oh, Guy, Guy! there has been some dreadful mistake! Oh, what—what can I have done?"

"Compose yourself, Isabel," soothed the Baronet, fearing that she was about to swoon.

"I cannot! I cannot!" she went on, excitedly. "I see it all now! It was I that was in the wrong! Oh, Guy, I believed you a villain—a monster!"

"And I, Isabel," he returned kindly, "I also have wronged you. It *must* be so. I will not believe anything else. I think we shall have much to forgive on both sides. Meanwhile, let us sift this affair thoroughly. Mrs. West called here to-night to warn me against Jasper Cox, who must be a villain of the blackest die. Mrs. West also tells me that she warned you to beware of him some time ago; but that, in spite of this, you still continue to meet him secretly out of doors. She says she saw you with Mr. Cox to day, under the cliffs; and so she determined to come and acquaint me of the whole business."

"Mrs. West," said Isabel, with decision, "you also have been mistaken. I never in my life met Mr. Cox in this clandestine manner. To convince you, know that I did not stir out of doors to-day."

"It is false, you bad, wicked girl!" exclaimed Mrs. West, indignantly.

But just at that critical moment the door opened, and in walked Ada May.

CHAPTER XIV.

BLACK SHEEP.

HARDLY had Mrs. West's quick eye fallen upon Ada's features, when she divined the true state of affairs. She had mistaken Isabel for Ada, whom she had never seen, save at a distance; and, strangely enough, had never heard of their striking resemblance to each other; for Mrs. West lived in an out-of-the-way spot, was not given to gossiping, had no friends, and but few acquaintances.

When Ada saw the visitor, a sudden chill ran through her frame—she knew not why, unless it were that this dark-robed stranger recalled to her mind the memorable ride that had nearly been Ada's last upon earth. But this was a vanished terror, and had left behind no unpleasant regrets.

"I am very sorry, Sir Guy," said Mrs. West, being the first to speak after Ada's entrance, "that I have been the cause of a misunderstanding between you and Miss Garnett. I now see the mischief I have wrought. This lady" (indicating the new-comer) "is evidently she whom I have so frequently seen in company with the so-called Jasper Cox. Is it not so?" she added, appealing to the lady in question.

"Ah!" thought Ada, "this person knows too much." She was not, however, by any means taken aback. She drew herself up haughtily, and replied, in a more independent manner than she would have used in Sir Guy's presence twenty-four hours previously, "Very probably, madam, you may have seen me a great number of times with Mr. Cox. But I fail to understand what that circumstance can have to do with you?"

"Unfortunately, it concerns me very materially. I am sorry that it will be my painful duty to open your eyes as to the true character of the gentleman, or rather the adventurer, in question. I use no stronger term, since, in the sight of Heaven, he is my husband!"

"Your husband!" cried Ada, starting, and with an ominous frown.

"Yes, my husband!" reiterated the other, with a sort of defiance in her voice. "But all I ask of him is justice to his child!"

Here there was another interruption.

The footman again entered, and announced "Mr. Cox."

Mrs. West started to her feet, and glanced wildly around, as if in search of some means of escape. Finding it not, she stood immovable, her eyes fixed upon the doorway.

Her heavy crape veil was thrown back over her bonnet; while her bloodless face shone forth from its sable frame like that of a marble statue, with living, moving eyes.

Little dreaming what was about to follow, Jasper Cox walked smilingly into the room. But he very quickly came to a full stop; for had he suddenly found himself at the mouth of a cannon about to be discharged, he could not have been more startled than when he encountered the fixed gaze of the dark-robed lady.

"Alice!" he cried out, in his wild surprise.

"Yes, Stanley! it is I," was the reply uttered somewhat unsteadily.

A muttered imprecation escaped his lips ere he had time to collect his scattered senses.

Sir Guy rose from his chair.

"Sir," said he, "be good enough to remember where you are."

Seeing that further disguise was useless, Cox now revealed himself in his true colors.

"Is it likely," he exclaimed, fiercely—"is it likely I should forget where I am, since I stand beneath my own roof, and the roof of my ancestors?"

All eyes were fixed wonderingly upon him, except Ada's. She sunk into a chair, and buried her face in her hands.

Sir Guy turned a shade paler, as he hoarsely demanded, "Who are you?"

"Ah, ha!" sneered the other man, with a demoniacal chuckle; "you begin to guess, do you? Well, I'll tell you who I am. I'm Sir Stanley Grove Vurnal, at your service." (A mocking bow). "And I have the pleasure of addressing my cousin, Mr. Guy Vurnal."

Isabel drew nearer to Sir Guy, and linked her arm in his. The simple action was strangely comforting to him.

His faith in her, even as her faith in him, had returned; and he felt that with love on his side, he could brave the whole world, if need were.

"You will have to prove all you say," said Guy, looking his enemy full in the face.

"That I shall have very little difficulty in doing," was the exultant reply.

"Perhaps you are not aware that, even did you succeed in proving yourself to be my uncle Winstanley's son, you could not claim the property?"

At this, a deep scowl passed over the other's face.

"I know that my father was disinherited, and that, consequently, his son can claim little beside the four walls of Crag-Vurnal and the family title. Had it been otherwise, you would have heard of me before now."

At this moment Ada started to her feet, and, hastily crossing the room, flung herself upon her knees before Guy and Isabel.

"Oh, Guy! oh, Isabel! forgive me!" she cried through her broken sobs.

Her cousin endeavored to raise her, but in vain; she only clung to his hand.

In the same agitated manner, she went on,

"No, no; I will not rise until I have confessed all! Oh, I have acted a cruel, heartless part! I have deceived you both, even as I myself have been deceived! Yes, I have been this base man's dupe—his wicked instrument! But I am rightly served! Oh, why did I not see through his miserable schemes?"

"Fool! idiot!" exclaimed Cox, passionately. "Beware what you say in a moment of frenzy! You will regret those mad words!"

Ada heeded him not; and he stood there actually grinding his teeth with rage, as she continued, in a calmer tone: "You will despise me, Guy, when you hear all. I despise myself. Oh, Guy, it was he"—and she pointed to Cox, without turning her head—"who stole that letter on the night of your return home. It was he, too, that wrote the note to Isabel, in Mr. Bevil's name; and I procured him a copy of the latter's handwriting. And it was I also that furnished the other information relative to your having proposed to Isabel. I overheard a short conversation between you both at the hall-door that day when you asked her to meet you in the conservatory. I guessed what had happened, and determined to turn the knowledge to my own advantage. At that time, Guy, nothing would satisfy my ambition but that I should be Lady Vurnal"—she did not say it without a blush, and her voice sunk almost to a whisper. "Yesterday, this man, whom we have known by the name of Cox, told me a secret, in consequence of which I promised to marry him, not knowing, of course, that he already had a wife living."

"Ada," cried Cox, now in a half-supplicating tone, "this wretched woman is not my wife. I am an unmarried man. I swear it!"

These words seemed for a moment to stagger Ada. Then the good predominated over the bad in her nature, and she continued her confession.

"The price that he put upon his secret was my participation in the destruction of the monument. His object was to get me into his power, and to gratify his insatiable hatred to the Vurnal family. And, oh, Guy," she went on, bursting into fresh sobs, and taking no notice of a warning growl from her sometime accomplice, "what will you say when you hear that it was my hand that lighted the fuse which communicated with the barrel of gunpowder—"

Here the penitent girl broke down, completely overcome by her feelings.

Isabel threw her arms round her sister's neck, and, kissing her affectionately, insisted upon her rising.

"What!" sobbed Ada. "Is it possible you can forgive me so soon?"

"Yes, Ada, dear; we both forgive you. You have been very wicked, but your repentance is full and sincere. Thank Heaven, it is not

too late!" And the generous girl glanced at Guy for his sanction to her words. He returned a look of love and admiration.

This reunion was evidently too much for the baffled villain who stood by, gnashing his teeth in the bitterness of his heart. He suddenly burst in with "You will all hear of me again!" and, shaking his fist, menacingly at the little party, he rushed from the room, and from the house.

A low moan from Alice West showed how deeply she was affected, and the next moment she sunk fainting into Guy Vurnal's arms.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SECRET.

THE late Sir Willoughby Grove Vurnal, Sir Guy's father, had been the younger of two sons. His brother, having been, to speak the plain, unvarnished truth, a wicked reprobate, was disinherited—that is, as far as it lay in their father's power to disinherit his elder son.

Winstanley Vurnal, the scapegrace alluded to, had put the finishing touch to a wild and extravagant career by forging his father's name to a large amount. Detection followed; ruin was the result. He changed his name to Stanley Grove, Grove being his mother's name. Then he married an actress, from the boards of a third-rate London theater. They fled together to the Continent. A year had hardly passed away when Stanley Grove was stricken with a fatal illness. For the first time since he had left England he wrote to his father, acquainting him of his marriage, and also of the birth of a son and heir.

Forgiveness in his heart, the father hastened to the bedside of the son. He was too late—Winstanley was dead. Disgusted by the vulgarity of his daughter-in-law, the old Baronet determined to have nothing to do with her. He was rejoiced to discover that the widow knew nothing of her late husband's history. Indeed, she was not even aware that his name had been an assumed one.

The wily old gentleman, therefore, pretended to have been but a dear friend of the dead man; and when he had caused the sum of one thousand pounds to be paid (anonymously) to the widow, considered he had done his duty. He returned to England, and announced the death of his eldest son; but said nothing whatever of the marriage of that son.

And thus he went to the grave—his lips sealed.

The younger son—Willoughby—then came in for the property and title. Time rolled on, and about five years before his death, on looking over a yellow, time-stained bundle of papers that had belonged to his father, he accidentally stumbled upon the letter written so many years ago by his dying brother to his father.

Sir Willoughby was petrified with astonishment. How could he tell but that he and his wife were usurpers? for, in all probability, his elder brother's wife and son were then living.

As his father had done before him, Willoughby locked the secret in his own breast, and there it lay like a leaden weight to drag him, eventually, to the grave.

The sealed packet that was stolen from Guy Vurnal, that memorable night when he returned to the home of his forefathers, contained an account of this unpleasant family secret. In it, too, the young man had received the most solemn injunctions not to breathe a word of his uncle Winstanley's marriage to any mortal during the lifetime of his mother; but after her death, Guy was to do his best to have justice done to Winstanley's wife and son, should either of them be living.

In this manner Willoughby Grove Vurnal strove to allay the pangs of a guilty conscience.

CHAPTER XVI.

ALICE WEST'S STORY.

WHEN Alice West recovered from the swoon in which we left her, she begged Ada to tell her all that she knew of the man who had wrecked her life. Ada willingly complied; and in return the "Woman in Black" narrated the sad story of her own life.

"My name is Alice West," she began. "I was an only child. I had no one on earth to love, and no one to love me, save my dear father, who was a clergyman in one of the midland counties. We were all in all to each other. Oh, if he had been spared to me, how different my life might have been!"

Here she paused for a moment or two. Presently she resumed:

"My poor father was stricken with a disease that was destined to prove fatal. As a last effort to save his precious life, I accompanied him, for change of air, to a small village in the south of France. Here I became acquainted with Stanley Grove, whom you have known as Jasper Cox; and here my father breathed his last.

"About the same time, Stanley's mother also died, so that he and I were companions in affliction."

"Then *she* is dead?" interrupted Guy, interestedly.

"Yes; she died more than two years ago, at a pretty ripe age, and little dreaming that she was a titled lady.

"Twelve months passed away, during which time I supported myself principally by my needle.

"Poor, almost broken-hearted, a stranger in a strange land, it was little wonder that the sympathy and protection of Stanley Grove

should grow very dear to me. At last I yielded to his entreaties, and we were married, as I thought.

"Another year passed away. My life had not been one of unclouded happiness. Then I discovered that our marriage had been a mockery, the ceremony having been performed by a villainous billiard-marker. I was in despair. We quarreled. He left me. I vowed to crawl after him from one end of the earth to the other. I would compel him to marry me, then he might go where he liked—the further away from me, the better. By a lucky chance a business letter of his fell into my hands. It was dated from Halton, Thither I, with my helpless babe, followed my betrayer. By another lucky chance, I met him in the streets of that town. He knew me not, my disguise being perfect. I tracked him to Glimmermere. You know the rest."

"Yours has, indeed, been a hard fate," said Isabel, sympathizingly.

"And that man is my cousin," mused Guy. "Has he any profession? How does he gain a livelihood?"

"He lives by his wits, and on the interest of the thousand pounds which, as it now turns out, was given to his mother by your grandfather."

"But," pursued Guy, "there is yet another thing that puzzles me. How did Cox—I beg his pardon, Sir Stanley Vurnal—find out the secret of his birth? For he must have known it before he came to Glimmermere."

"I can tell you that," said Ada. "One day, in a hotel at Paris, he overheard a conversation between you and an elderly gentleman, who appeared to be a great friend of your family."

"Ah, I remember," said Guy. "It was old Major Fare."

"In the course of conversation," pursued Ada, "your friend happened to mention the names of your father and grandfather—Sir Winstanley Vurnal, and Sir Willoughby Grove Vurnal. Now this Stanley Grove had entertained a slight suspicion that there was some mystery attached to his family history. The unusual manner in which his mother had received the thousand pounds would indicate as much. He, therefore, thought it likely, from the similarity of names, that he was a connexion of yours. He followed you home; and the letter which so opportunely fell into his hands told him all he wished to know. Thus he found himself heir to a title, and master of Crag-Vurnal, with a few acres of land in the immediate neighborhood."

Guy shrugged his shoulders, as he asked, "Then why did he not come forward at once, like a man, and declare his claims?"

"Oh," returned Ada, "he knew that a title and a fine house would be next to useless without money to keep them up. He wanted a

rich wife; and that, he thought, he would have found in me. For he said he had only to play his cards well to double the fortune your father's will entitled me to."

"Ah, I see," mused Guy. "The stolen document made him far too wise."

"When he had secured me," Ada went on, "he intended to have shown himself your most bitter and merciless enemy. Ah, he thought that in me he had a poor, spiritless dupe! But he was mistaken!" And, by way of enforcing her words, she burst into tears.

Her companions sought to comfort her; but it was some time ere they succeeded in doing so.

It was plainly to be seen that the unhappy girl had thrown over her lover more from the pique than from a sense of duty.

Shortly afterward, Alice West, having thanked her new friends for their sympathy and kindness, rose to depart.

But Guy would not hear of her going out alone at that time of night; neither would he allow her to walk. He ordered a close carriage, and himself accompanied her to herdsman's cottage, where she lodged.

Arrived there, Guy's companion invited him in to see her baby. He readily assented. She quietly raised the latch of the door, and led the way to a small apartment on the right, where a lamp was dimly burning. But when the fond mother gently approached the snowy cot that stood near the fireplace, a low wail burst from her lips. The cradle was empty!

The poor woman seemed to guess instinctively what had occurred.

"He has stolen my child!" she cried, and fell upon her knees in an agony of terror and grief.

"Nay, nay," urged Guy; "you are over-anxious and excited to-night. Why should you jump at so unlikely a conclusion? The little fellow may have got restless. No doubt you will find him safe in the custody of the good woman of the house."

But even as he spoke, the herdsman's wife made her appearance, and held up her hands in genuine amazement when she saw the empty cot.

"La, ma'am! Dear heart, I'm all of a tremble!" she declared, rubbing her eyes to see if she was quite awake. "This is not natural. It must be the good people's doin'. No one has been in the house—leastways, no human Christian. It's not much more than an hour ago since I came in to see the dear child, and then he was slumberin' like a little angel."

"He has stolen my child!" moaned the mother. "Oh, he will kill it in his blind rage!"

Guy drew the woman of the house aside, and told her to stay with Mrs. West, and try to comfort her.

"Above all things," he added, "don't let

her leave the house. Tell her to be patient, and I will find her child, if it is possible to do so."

Then the kind-hearted young fellow returned to his carriage, and ordered the coachman to drive to Glimmermere.

CHAPTER XVII.

FATHER AND CHILD.

SIR STANLEY GROVE VURNAL, *alias* Jasper Cox, left the presence of his accusers completely frantic with his discomfiture. He was a passionate man. He really loved Ada May as much as his selfish nature would permit of his loving any one. She had betrayed him. Then, after all, he had not held her by the iron grasp he had fondly imagined. It had been gall to him to witness the perfect love and trust that now existed between Guy Vurnal and Isabel. But perhaps the most bitter drop he had to swallow was the comparative indifference with which Guy bore the announcement of his (Stanley's) name and parentage—intelligence that it was not unreasonable to suppose would have overwhelmed his enemy with confusion.

Ah, but Stanley forgot that the moment that had stripped Guy of a title—ay, robbed him of the very roof above his head—he forgot that that moment had also restored him to love and Isabel, without which, life under any circumstances, would have been an intolerable burden.

Moreover, Stanley, himself unscrupulous, did not give his cousin credit for being anything better. Whereas Guy, had it not been for his mother's sake, and for the peremptory injunctions laid upon him by his father, would have searched for the heir of Crag-Vurnal immediately on his becoming aware of the probable existence of such a person.

When Stanley rushed from the house, rage and mortification surging within him, he, hardly conscious of the fact, and without any definite object in view, took the path leading to the lone cottage of the herdsman, where he knew the "Woman in Black" lived.

Arrived there, he peeped in through one of the two front windows. The master and mistress were seated at either side of a blazing wood fire, both fast asleep. Stanley next applied one eye to a rent in the drawn blind of the other window. He then cautiously examined the door to see if it was locked. It yielded to a gentle push. He entered. The next moment he was bending over a little cot, no look of fatherly love or pity on his white, fierce face, as he gazed down upon that sweet little countenance, smiling in its innocent slumbers. A moment more, and he had lifted the baby, clothes and all, from the cradle. Yet another moment, and he had left the house as noiselessly as he had entered it.

Oh, surely some foul demon was in communion with that wretched man as he sped swiftly across the fields with his helpless burden! It could not otherwise be that a father would contemplate the atrocious act which now was in his thoughts.

Father and child!

Murder in the heart of one; the other pressed to that guilty heart, still smiling sweetly, dreaming, perchance, of the gentle mother whose name those little lips had not yet learned to lispl

They were nearing the sea-shore!

The sound of the waves as they dashed against the rocks grew louder and louder each moment, till at last their angry roar alone was to be heard.

The man, clasping his burden, stands upon the cliffs, above the frowning waters. He stoops; the deed is all but done. The child awakes. Its large, wondering brown eyes are fixed upon the star-spangled firmament. It is the first time they have ever rested there. Two chubby hands are lifted upward; lifted toward Heaven. Then the poor little thing crows forth its infantile delight.

On either side of the father stands a figure. On the left, a hideous, sable-robed demon, with flaming eyes, and long-nailed claws, like eagle's talons, ever ready to clutch their prey. To the right stands a glorious form, with hair of congealed sunshine, starry eyes, snowy wings of purest down, and glittering raiment, like unto running water.

Her countenance of heavenly beauty is sad and bright alternately, while the demon's foul visage is ever anxiously exultant.

Great beads of cold perspiration stand upon the man's white brow. He is torn by conflicting emotions. Now he listens to the demon's voice; anon, the angel's soft, persuasive touch thrills him to the very core.

At length the demon waxes wroth, and his whispers grow loud and fierce. The father, with a convulsive motion, raises his helpless babe in the air; then, with a low moan, places it on his breast again. The battle is won.

He glances helplessly at the angel. She moves away, and beckons him to follow. He does so; while the now scowling demon clings to him, and endeavors to draw him back.

After some time they approach a fisherman's cottage. There is a light in the window, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour. The angel takes the baby from its father's not unwilling clasp, and, having kissed it, places it gently on the door-step.

Kissed it? Yes. Ah, but what does that action denote? Hush! the face hallowed by an angel's kiss is destined soon to shine in Heaven!

Then the angel, radiant with smiles, spread her glorious wings, and waved them to sweet

and distant music. Thus she ascended, and disappeared.

The demon sunk, groaning, into the earth. The man turned, and fled.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FLEETING SHADOWS.

ON the following morning, Guy Vurnal left his room, looking happier than he had done for many a day past. His face, though somewhat pale, showed no other signs of fatigue, notwithstanding that he had had but little rest.

In the lobby he encountered Isabel. He linked his arm in hers, and whispered something into her ear—something that sent the blood into her face and a happy light into her eyes.

"What a pair of bunglers we have proved ourselves!" she whispered, shyly,

"My darling, we shall be all the happier in the future.

"Oh, Guy, how could I have doubted you?"

"And I, Isabel—I must have been mad to have believed aught against the purest, brightest creature in the world!"

She was about to remonstrate, but he stopped her mouth with a kiss; then whistling a gay tune ran off to his mother's room.

Lady Vurnal (for so her friends continued to style her, although she could not lawfully claim that title) was already up. Seated in a comfortable arm-chair before the fire, and wrapped in her dressing gown, she was awaiting breakfast, being too unwell to venture down-stairs. She smiled as her son affectionately kissed her brow.

"Guy," began the invalid, in a slightly surprised tone, "has anything happened? You look quite bright and happy; more so, indeed, than I have seen you since your return."

"Yes, mother dear, something *has* happened. I bring you good news, and some too, that I fear will pain you very much. But you must promise not to be distressed by anything that I may tell you," he added, in a graver tone.

"Oh, my dear boy," the invalid anxiously returned, "I am aware that there is some terrible secret that has made you so dull and gloomy of late. You have grown so reserved, too. You do not love and trust your old mother, as formerly you did."

"Nay, mother, you misjudge me. I love you too well to let a shadow cross your path if I could turn it aside. But now for my good news," he went on, resuming his light manner. "I am going to present you with a daughter-in-law."

The old lady was all smiles in a moment.

"That is good news, indeed," she cried. "Can it be Isabel? Oh, Guy! say that it is Isabel, and all else you have to tell will sink into nothingness."

"You have guessed rightly, mother, it is Isabel."

The poor old lady threw her arms round her son, and sobbed forth her delight.

"Alas!" thought Guy, with a sigh; "if I could leave her thus in ignorance of this other unpleasant affair!"

"Ah, Guy," rejoined his mother, "you sigh. You are unhappy still. Tell me all, my dear boy."

And forthwith he commenced the story of the family secret.

The old lady cried a good deal, and was half bewildered at the strange tale; indeed, at first she could hardly realize how matters stood.

"My poor Willoughby!" she at length said. "He was so good to me; always thinking how best to promote my happiness! But, Guy, you have not told me why your father wished you to travel for two years after you became of age."

"In order that I might gain a knowledge of the world before I became possessed of the secret; and also, disapproving of early marriages, he considered it wise to separate me from my fair cousins for the period named."

Lady Vurnal sighed as she wiped away her fast-falling tears.

"And must we leave our dear old home?" she presently asked. "Guy, it will break my heart!"

"No, mother," he cried, cheerfully. "It is not so bad as that. Last night I offered our newly-discovered relative to take Crag-Vurnal off his hands at a yearly rent of more than three times its value; and, much as he would have liked to turn us all out of doors, he is too poor to refuse so handsome an offer."

This satisfactory piece of news in a great measure consoled the old lady. Guy then began to talk of Isabel. The *ruse* succeeded; for before he left the room, he had the satisfaction of seeing a smile upon his mother's face.

"Send her to me directly after breakfast," said the good lady.

Guy promised, and withdrew.

Ada hung her head, and looked uncomfortable when Guy entered the breakfast-room, where she and her now happy step-sister awaited him.

What! cried Guy, gayly, with the good-natured intention of putting Ada more at her ease. "I shall allow no downcast looks to-day. Cheer up, Ada! I don't like to see you look unhappy."

"You and Isabel are so good, Guy," murmured the girl, tearfully, "that I cannot help hating my own wickedness. It seems incredible that you should forgive, and be so kind to me after what has passed."

"Nonsense, little witch! Everything un-

pleasant is forgotten. Never name this subject again. I have something strange to tell you; and here goes? As you are aware, I saw Mrs. West to her lodgings last night. Well, when we arrived there, we found that her baby had been stolen!"

"Stolen!" cried both girls, in surprise.

"Yes; stolen by its father, to whom, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, I at once determined to pay a visit. I arrived at the inn only a few minutes after him. I found him weary and utterly dispirited. The first thing I did was to offer him a large sum for the rental of Crag-Vurnal. He agreed to my terms. But I imposed one condition to this arrangement—that he should tell me what he had done with his child. At first he denied having taken it from its mother's protection. I was firm. He yielded, and told the truth. 'I had intended to throw the child into the sea,' declared my worthy cousin, with sullen bitterness; 'but, like a weak-minded fool, changed my mind, and threw it on a fisherman's doorstep instead.' Then, after settling a few other matters of a purely business nature, I left the inn; and before I returned home last night, had succeeded in restoring the infant to its grateful mother."

"Good, noble Guy!" cried the proud and happy Isabel.

"Tush!" said Guy, lightly, as he rose from table. "I only did my duty."

Ada then escaped to her room to have good cry.

"I have a visit to pay this morning," resumed Guy. "Can you guess to whom, Isabel?"

"I think so," she returned, with a slight blush. "You are going to see the Squire."

"Right! Poor old Frank Bevil! I am almost ashamed to face him."

"He is too good to bear malice."

"By the by, Isabel, I promised to send you to my mother directly after breakfast."

"Then I'll run off at once."

"No, no! don't be in such a hurry. I did not mean—"

But she had fled; and we are afraid the disappointed lover called himself some very naughty names.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

It will take but a few words to tell what remains to be told of our story.

Isabel and Guy were quietly married, and were as happy a pair as ever stood at the hymeneal altar, in spite of the fact that they were simply Mr. and Mrs. Guy Vurnal. But six months had hardly passed away when they awoke, one fine morning, to find themselves Sir Guy and Lady Vurnal.

Every one has heard of the old adage, "Set

a beggar on horseback." Well, Sir Stanley Vernal developed a wonderful fondness for the chase; and one day rode to his death.

Alice West lived to be happy. She had one severe trial, however. On the night its father took it from its warm cradle into the cold air, her baby, always a delicate child, caught a severe cold, and a few days afterward died. The good Frank Bevil alternately consoled and wept with the bereaved mother. The end of it was that these two became attached to each other; and, in little more than twelve months, they were married.

Ada May (we regret to have to record it) lived and died an old maid; still, she was of good and cheerful disposition. She lived a long life, and died respected by all. Once did she stray from the path of rectitude, and only once. But, reader, she never forgot her first love.

The Glimmermere monument stands to this day; and if you examine it closely you will see that part of the structure is of a more modern date than the remainder.

THE END.

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